Photographed in Aspen, Colorado

Darling George,
I'll never
forget those wonderful
long evenings we
spent together in Aspen.
Kisses,
Becky

12-25-75

"NICHOLAS OF REIST STOOD ON THE THRESHOLD."

THE WORKS OF

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

THE TRAITORS

McKINLAY, STONE & MACKENZIE
NEW YORK

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The Traitors

CHAPTER I

"Down with the traitors! Down with the Russian spies! Down with Metzger!"

Above the roaring of the north wind rose the clamour of voices, the cries of hate and disgust, the deep groaning sobs of fierce and militant anger. The man and the woman exchanged quick glances.

"They are coming nearer," he said.

She drew aside the heavy curtain, and stood there, looking out into the night.

"It is so," she answered. "They are pouring into the square."

He rose and stood beneath the great carved mantelpiece. Over his head, hewn out of the solid oak, black with age and coloured with that deep richness which is to-day as a lost art, were blazoned the arms of one of Europe's noblest families. He, Nicholas of Reist, its sole male representative, stood deep in thought, his dark young face furrowed with anxiety. The moment was critical. It was one of a lifetime.

She dropped the curtain and came over to his side. The flush of excitement was in her cheeks. Her eyes

were like shining stars. Of their close relationship there could be no manner of doubt. The same oval face and finely-cut features, the same pride of race, the same firm, graceful bearing. Only there were lines upon his face—the lines of thought and care; whilst hers remained as smooth as damask, typically and wonderfully beautiful.

Again the murmur of hoarse voices—nearer now and more clamorous.

"Down with the traitor Metzger and his accursed government! Reist! Reist! A Reist!"

Her white fingers fell upon his shoulder.

"They are calling for you, Nicholas," she said, softly. "Listen! It is the voice of our people, and they need you. Will you go out and speak to them? Shall I open the window—yes?"

"Not yet," he answered, swiftly. "Not yet."

Her hands were already upon the curtains. She turned around, an impatient frown upon her face.

"You do not hesitate, my brother," she cried. "No, it is not possible. It is our country, Nicholas, our homeland which calls for you to save it."

"Ay, to save it—but how? Metzger has made the way difficult."

Her eyes flashed fire upon him. She was superbly disdainful.

"Are you the first Duke of Reist who has governed Theos?" she cried. "Is there not the blood of former Kings in your veins? Holy Mother, but it is intolerable that you should hesitate! Nicholas, if you let these people call in vain you will be the first of our race who

has ever shrunk from his duty. I will not call you any longer my brother. Listen!"

"Reist! Nicholas of Reist! Down with the common dogs. Down with the traitors. Down with Metzger!"

He smiled faintly. Those subtle lines about his mouth were not there in vain.

"I wonder where Metzger is hiding," he murmured. "How good it would be to see him now. How he would quiver and shake. There is death in those voices."

She flashed a look of impatient scorn upon him.

"You are trifling with your destiny, Nicholas," she cried. "What matters the life or death of such as Metzger? Our people need you. Out and tell the men of Theos that once again a Reist will save his country."

"Brave words, little sister. Brave words."

Her eyes were ablaze with anger.

"Have I been mistaken in you all these years, Nicholas?" she cried. "Listen again. Those are the children of your city who call to you for aid. Have you no longer the heart of a man or the blood of a patriot?"

A storm of wind and rain shook the high windows. From below came the sound of a multitude thronging nearer and nearer till the square seemed filled to overflowing with a surging mob. The man raised his head as one who listens, and the smile no longer lightened his face. The woman who watched him anxiously drew a long sigh of relief. She knew then beyond a doubt that it needed no words from her to fire his resolution.

"Marie," he said, quietly, "those are the voices which I have prayed all my life that I might hear. Only I fear that they have come too soon. Have you considered what it is that they would have from me?"

"They would make you lord of the country," she cried. "Who better or more fitted? Have no fear, Nicholas. You come of a race of rulers. The God of our fathers will guide your destiny."

The room, huge, unlit and darkened with tapestry hangings, seemed full of mysterious shadows. Only those two faces—the girl's passionate, the man's keenly thoughtful—seemed like luminous things. From below came still the murmur of voices rising every now and then to a hoarse roar. The man became suddenly explicit. His face relaxed. He came back from a far-away land of thought.

"Listen," he said. "These people have come to put me in Metzger's place. There would be no difficulty about that. Already I have received a message from the House of Laws. Bah! I have no stomach to sit in council with tradesmen and citizens, to have my will questioned, to rule only by a casting vote. These modern forms of government are vile. They would make me President of their Republic—I, a Reist of Theos, whose forefathers ruled the land with sword and fire. They would put me in the place of Metzger, the merchant—Metzger, who would have sold his country to the Russians. I say no!"

"What, then?" she cried. "What, then? Speak, Nicholas. There are thoughts behind. Who but I should know them?"

"When I rule Theos," he answered, slowly, "it shall be even as the Dukes of Reist have ruled it before me, with a sceptre in their hands, and a sword upon their knees. That time is not yet, Marie, but it may come. I think that you and I will see it."

"Why not now?" she cried. "The people would accept you on any terms. The Republic has fallen. You shall be their King."

He shook his head.

"The time is not yet," he repeated. "Marie, believe me, I know my people. In their blood lingers still some taint of the democratic fever. You must learn, little sister, as I have learned it, the legend on our walls and shield, the motto of our race, 'Slowly, but ever forward.'"

"But the people," she cried. "What will you say to them? It is you whom they want. Their throats are hoarse with shouting."

He threw open the great windows, and a roar of welcome from below rose high above the storm.

"You shall hear what I will say to them, Marie," he answered. "Come out by my side."

CHAPTER II

ALMOST as the man stepped out on to the massive stone balcony of his house, the wind dropped, and a red flaring sun dipped behind the towering mountains which guarded the city westwards and eastwards. A roar of greeting welcomed his appearance, and while he waited for silence his eyes rested fondly upon the long line of iron-bound hills, stern and silent guardians of the city of his birth. For a moment he forgot his ambitions and the long unswerving pursuit of his great desire. The love of his country was born in the man—the better part of him was steeped in patriotic fervour. And most of all, he loved this ancient city amongst the hills, the capital of the State, where many generations of his family had lived and died. Dear to him were its squares and narrow streets, the ancient stone houses, the many picturesque records of its great age ever, as it seemed to him, frowning with a stern and magnificent serenity amongst the tawdry evidences of later days and the irresistible march of modernity. The wine-shops of a hundred years ago flourished still side by side with the more pretentious cafés, half French, half Russian, which had sprung up like mushrooms about the city. The country-made homespuns, the glassware and metal work, heritage of generations of craftsmen, survived still the hideous competition of cheap Lancashire productions and Brummagem ware. The picturesque old fought a brave battle with the tinsel and tawdriness of the new.

If Nicholas of Reist could have had his way he would have built an impenetrable wall against this slow poison, the unwelcome heritage of western progress. He would have thrust the ages back a century and built bulwarks about his beloved country. He looked downwards, and his heart grew warm within him. Many of the people who shouted his name were from the country districts and wore the picturesque garb of their forefathers long extinct in the city. The sight of their eager, upturned faces was dear to him. Some day they should be his people indeed. It should be his country to rule as he thought best. He felt himself at that moment a patriot pure and simple.

So he spoke to them in that clear, sweet voice which every Reist possessed, and he spoke fluently and convincingly.

"My fellow-countrymen," he said, "these are not days for those who love their country to waste breath in idle speech. Your Republic of which you were so proud has fallen. Metzger has proved himself a traitor. Well, I am not surprised at either of these things. I warned you, but you would not listen. Your ancient Kings must indeed have turned in their graves when you elected to be ruled by such men. You have tried them, and you have been betrayed. What would you have with me?"

"A new government," they cried. "A Reist for President!"

He raised his hand. The roar of voices died away at once.

"You would put me," he said, "in Metzger's place.

You would make me President of the Republic of Theos. Is that what you would have?"

"Ay! Ay!" from a thousand tongues. Then there was a breathless silence. They waited in deep anxiety for the answer of this man whom they had come to look upon as their one possible saviour.

For awhile he stood there speechless, deep in thought. After all, was he not throwing away a certainty for what might prove an empty dream? There had been Presidents who had become Dictators, and between that and Monarchy the chasm was narrow and easily bridged. It was not for long, however, that he wavered. His plans were too carefully thought out to be changed by an impulse, however powerful. His time was not yet.

"My people," he said quietly, "I thank you, and I am sorry that what you ask may not be. It is not because I do not love my country, it is not because I would not shed my last drop of blood in her defence. But President of your Republic I never will be. No earthly power should draw my footsteps across the threshold of your brand-new Parliament."

There arose a deep murmur of disappointment—almost of despair. They shouted questions, appeals, prayers, and Nicholas of Reist leaned far over his time-worn stone balcony and spoke to them again.

"You are questioning my patriotism," he cried. "You do not understand. Very well, you shall know all that is in my mind. I am going to say what will sound like treason to you. Perhaps you will shout me down—it may be that you will leave me now in disgust. Nevertheless, listen. I hate your Republic. It is a

rotten, corrupt thing. I hate what you have called your Parliament. There is scarcely a man in it whom I would trust. What has your new-fangled scheme of government done for you? It has made you the sport and plaything of the Powers, our independence is hourly threatened, ay, even before this year has passed away the cannon of the invader may be thundering against your walls. When that time comes I promise that you shall not call to me in vain. You shall find me amongst you sword in hand, and I pray God that I may do my duty as a patriot and a faithful son of the State. But this thing which you ask of me now I will not do. I will not take my seat at the same table with those who have helped Metzger to traffic in the freedom of this country. I will not speak with or have any dealing with them. How is it that you have dared to ask me this thing, men of Theos? Already the war beacons are built—soon they may be reddening our skies. This is what your Republic has done for you, and as God is my witness, so long as that Republic exists I will not lift my little finger to help you."

Something of a panic seized the people, for indeed the words of the speaker had come home to them, winged with a foretelling truth. Metzger, their President, had been caught red-handed in a flagrant attempt to barter away the freedom of their country. Who else might not be implicated? They looked at one another fearfully. One feeling alone was common to all. Before them was the only man whom they could trust—one of their ancient nobility, a patriot, above suspicion. He had more to say. They would take him on his own

terms. So once more the air was rent with their cries, and Nicholas of Reist raised again his hand.

"Listen," he said. "You want my advice. You have come to me because the State is in danger, and because those who should have defended it have played you false. So be it! I speak to you as man to man, citizen of Theos to citizen of Theos. No Republic can save you. It is a King you want."

A deep, hoarse murmur swept upwards from the packed square. The Republic had been their plaything, the caprice of an impulsive people, and they were loth to own themselves in the wrong. Nicholas of Reist read their faces like a book. Now or never must he win his way from this people, or fall forever from their regard. His pale countenance was lit with a passionate earnestness. He leaned towards them, and his voice throbbed with tremulous eloquence.

"Listen," he cried. "You have had a Parliament and a President—Metzger. What glories has he won for you?—how has he enriched you, how much more prosperous is our country? I will tell you what he has done. He has tried to sell you and Theos for a million pounds. Oh, I am not afraid to tell you the truth, though one of you should shoot me whilst I stand here. Theos was to become a tributary state to Russia. Your country, which has defied conquest for a thousand years, was to be bartered away that one man might live in luxury on his miserable blood-money. Men of Theos, turn over the back pages of your country's history. Think of those heroes who gave their lives that you might be free men. Think of King Rudolph, who

vanquished all the hosts of Austria, or King Ughtred, who drove the Turks back across the Balkans in mid-winter, and with five thousand ill-armed men routed the whole army of the Sultan. Remember Rudolph the Second, who defended this very city for twelve months against fifty thousand Turks, until for very shame England held up her hand and all Europe rang with the gallantry of our King and his little band of half-starved soldiers. Leave Republics to nations who have no past, and whose souls are steeped in commerce. What have we to do with them? We have a magnificent history, an ancient and glorious country. We have soldiers, few perhaps, but matchless throughout the world. And men of Theos, listen. Metzger has gone far in his treachery. I know nothing of your State affairs, but this I do know. The covetousness of those with whom he dealt is whetted. They are not likely to bear their disappointment quietly. Before many months have passed the storm may burst—the war beacons may be flaring round our borders. So I say to you, have no more dealings with Republics. Scatter your Parliament to the four winds of Heaven, summon back your ancient House of Laws, choose for yourselves a soldier King, one of the ancient and royal race, who shall rule you as his forefathers did in times of peace, and ride before you with drawn sword when the war clouds gather."

The babel of many voices broke loose. Reist felt his sister's fingers close upon his arm.

"It is you who must be their King, Nicholas."

He shook his head. Then they saw that he would speak again, and the murmur of voices died away.

Reist leaned over towards them, and his face was very pale. This was his renunciation.

"My people," he said, "listen. Many of you have heard of the war which the English have been carrying on in Egypt. You have heard perhaps of a Captain Erlito, who, with a dozen men, held a Nile fort for two days against a thousand dervishes, and for this and other acts of valour has won the Iron Cross. But this at least you do not know. Captain Erlito is the assumed name of Ughtred of Tyrnaus, Prince of Theos."

The murmur of voices became a roar of acclamation. Then Nicholas of Reist raised his voice at once.

"Listen, men of Theos," he cried. "Is it your will that I seek out for you Prince Ughtred and offer him the throne of Theos? Think well before you answer. He is a soldier, a brave and honest man, and he is of the royal race of Tyrnaus, who for many generations have been Kings of Theos. He will not sell you to Russia or beckon the hosts of the Sultan across the mountains. Will you have him for your King?"

The square, nay, the city, rang with their passionate answer. Never was anything more unanimous. Nicholas stepped back into the room. His sister faced him with blazing eyes and cheeks dyed red with anger.

"Fool!" she cried, "fool! They would have made you King. They were yours to do what you would with. You have been false to your destiny. I will never forgive you, Nicholas."

He smiled curiously, and pointed upwards to that deep-engraven legend.

"My time," he said, "is not yet."

CHAPTER III

THE lift went rumbling up to the topmost storey of the great block of flats, and stopped at last with something of a groan. The gates were opened, and Reist stepped out. He looked about him at the bare walls, the stone floor, and shrugged his shoulders. Erlito was none too well lodged then—soldiering had brought him some brief fame, but little else. Then he suddenly smiled. The incongruity of the thing was ridiculous. His sense of humour, by no means a characteristic trait of the man, was touched. The smile lingered upon his lips. He had come to offer a kingdom to a pauper!

The lift-boy slammed his gates and prepared to descend.

"Captain Erlito's rooms are at the end of the passage, sir," he volunteered. "Last door on the left."

The information was properly rewarded, and the boy's tolerant contempt for the foreigner, who at his journey's end seemed afflicted with a curious hesitation, became an extinct thing. He pulled the rope and descended in hot haste, a large silver coin locked in his fingers and a glorious tingling sensation of unbounded wealth in his bosom.

Reist knocked at the door which had been pointed out to him, and waited. There came no answer. He tried again, and became conscious of a confused volume of sounds within, altogether drowning his summons for

admission. He listened, perplexed. Light and rapid footsteps, the swishing of a silken skirt, a clear, musical laugh and cry of triumph, a succession of sounds which were wholly meaningless to him. Surely it was some sort of pandemonium. A momentary silence was followed by a chorus of voices. Reist raised his stick and knocked more loudly. A man's voice travelled out to him like mild thunder.

"Come in!"

Reist opened the door and crossed the threshold. Before him was an explanation of the sounds which he had heard. Only he was, if possible, a little more bewildered than ever.

He was in a high, bare apartment, carpetless, and almost without furniture. Across the middle of the floor was stretched an upright net, and on either side of it were chalk-marked squares. Facing him was a girl with her left foot poised slightly forward, her arm raised, in the act of striking a feathered cork with a small racquet. By her side was a man whom Reist recognized at once. Directly he saw his visitor he stopped the game.

"One moment, Miss Van Decht," he cried. "I am wanted."

He crossed the room, swinging his racquet in his hand, and addressed Reist with a pleasant smile.

"We have been making so much noise," he said, "that I am afraid we did not hear your first knock. I am Captain Erlito. You wished to see me?"

Reist looked him steadily and full in the face. If physique went for anything this man was surely born to be a King. He was well over six feet, splendidly made,

and of military appearance. His features were clean-cut in the unmistakable Tyrnaus mould—only his mouth, which, stern though it was, was full of humour, seemed unfamiliar. His eyes were a wonderful deep blue, and his skin bronzed and burned with the Egyptian sun. A momentary bitterness possessed Reist. The people of Theos would care little for the brains which this man might lack. The first glance of him would be sufficient. They would shout him King till they were hoarse.

"You do not remember me, then?" Reist asked, softly.

Erlito stood swinging his racquet lightly in his fingers, and looked into his visitor's face with pleasant and deferential courtesy.

"Do you know," he said, "I am very sorry, but I am afraid that I do not. I have a very bad memory for faces. There is something about yours which seems to me familiar, but it comes from a long way back."

Reist smiled faintly.

"Yes," he said, "it comes indeed from a long way back. It comes from our boyhood. I hope at least that you have not forgotten my name. I am Nicholas of Reist."

A radiant smile broke across Erlito's face. He dropped his racquet and held out both his hands.

"It is little Nick!" he cried. "By all that is wonderful it is little Nick! Remember you? Why, we played soldiers together when we were children. A thousand, thousand welcomes."

He wrung his visitor's hands. His eyes were very bright. He was undoubtedly affected.

"I am glad that you have not forgotten those days," Reist murmured. "As children we were together day by day. Yet it is very long ago, and for you at least," he continued, "there have been so many great happenings."

"It is splendid of you to have found me out," Erlito cried. "I imagined that no one knew even of my existence. And Marie?"

"My sister is quite well," Reist answered. "I had forgotten for the moment that she too was once your playmate. It is so long ago."

"She is with you in London? You are living here, perhaps?" Erlito asked. "It is the most hospitable city in the world."

Reist shook his head.

"There is only one home for us," he answered. "I do not love strange cities."

"You mean ——"

"Theos!"

Erlito's face clouded suddenly over. He glanced uneasily behind him. His face became graver, his expression resolved itself into sterner lines. A sudden bitterness found its way into his tone. The mention of Theos had stung him.

"The Republic tolerates aristocrats, then," he remarked. "You are fortunate."

Reist drew himself up.

"The Republic," he answered, proudly, "would never dare to interfere with us. While the people of Theos remain, we of Reist are safe."

There was a momentary pause. Reist was conscious

that his impetuous speech was scarcely a happy one. For it was this man indeed who was the outcast—whose name even had become strange to the people over whom his forefathers had ruled. Erlito showed no resentment, but his eyes were very sorrowful.

"Your family," he said, slowly, "have always been patriots. You deserve well of your country people."

Reist glanced once more around the room.

"My visit to you," he said, "is not one of courtesy—nay, let me say affection, only. I have a weighty matter to discuss with you. Will you allow me to outstay your guests?"

"With all the pleasure in the world," Erlito answered, heartily. "I should indeed insist upon it."

"You will perhaps continue your—game," Reist suggested, with another glance towards the net. "My time is yours."

Erlito hesitated.

"You are very good, Nicholas," he said. "We are, as you see, playing Badminton, and as a matter of fact we are very much in earnest about this game. Miss Van Decht and I are playing the deciding match with my friends there, Hassen and Brand. Let me find you a chair, and present you to these good people. Afterwards—it will not be long—I shall be wholly at your service; and, Nicholas, if you please, I am Erlito only here. You understand?"

Reist assented gravely, and Erlito turned round. The two players were talking to the girl across the net. An elderly man with grey imperial and smoking a long cigar was leaning back in a deck-chair.

"Miss Van Decht," Erlito said, turning to her, "will you permit me to present to you my very old friend, the Duke Nicholas of Reist—Miss Van Decht, Mr. Van Decht, Mr. Hassen, Mr. Brand."

Reist bowed low before the girl, who looked straight into his eyes with a frank and pleasant curiosity. She was largely made, but the long flowing lines of her figure were perfectly and symmetrically graceful. Her features were delicate, but her mouth was delightful—large, shapely and sensitive. Her light brown hair, which showed a disposition to wave, had escaped bounds a little during the violent exercise and had fallen into picturesque disorder. She smiled charmingly at Reist, but said nothing beyond the conventional words of greeting. Then she looked up at Erlito with twinkling eyes.

"Mr. Brand is getting insupportable," she declared. "He is like all you obstinate Englishmen. He does not know when he is beaten."

"We will endeavour," Erlito said, taking up his racquet, "to impress it upon him. There are cigarettes by your side, Reist."

The girl went to her place at the end of the court.

"This must be the deciding game," she declared, "for the light is going, and dad is smoking his last cigar. Ready! Serve!"

The game recommenced. Reist sat upon an overturned box by the side of Mr. Van Decht smoking a cigarette and watching gravely the flying figures. It was the girl who absorbed most of his attention. To him she was an utterly new type. She was as beautiful in her way as his own sister, but her frank energy and

the easy terms of intimacy which obviously existed between her male companions and herself was wholly inexplicable to him. He watched her with fascinated gaze. All the beautiful women whom he had ever known had numbered amongst their characteristics a certain restraint, almost an aloofness, which he had come to look upon as their inevitable attribute. Their smiles were rare and precious marks of favour, an undisturbed serenity of deportment was almost an inherent part of their education. Here was a woman of the new world, no less to be respected, he was sure, than her sisters of Theos, Vienna, and St. Petersburg, yet viewing life from a wholly different standpoint. From the first there was something curiously fascinating to Reist in the perfect naturalness and self-assurance of the girl whose every thought and energy seemed centred just then upon that flying cork. Her lips were slightly parted, her eyes were bright, her face was full of colour and vivacity. She sprang backwards and forwards, jumped and stooped with the delightful freedom of perfect health and strength. She even joined in the chaff which flashed backwards and forwards across the net, good-humoured always, and gay, but always personal and indicating a more than common intimacy between the little party. Reist would have been quite content to have sat and watched her until the game was over, but for a sudden, and to him amazing, incident. At a critical moment Erlito missed a difficult stroke—the younger and slighter of his two opponents threw his racquet into the air with a curious little cry of triumph.

"Ho-e-la! Ho-e-la!"

Reist started almost to his feet, and the blood surged hotly in his veins. Where had he heard that cry before? He looked the man over with a swift and eager scrutiny. Olive-cheeked, with black eyes and moustache, slightly-hooked nose and light, graceful bearing, he might have belonged to any of the southern nations. He was certainly no Englishman. "Ho-e-la! Ho-e-la!" How the fever of hate was kindled in Reist's heart as the echoes of that cry rang through the room. His memory, too, was swift and vivid. No longer he sat in that bare attic watching the flying figures of the Badminton players and listening to their cheerful badinage. Walls enclosed him no more. He saw out over the sea and land, he saw things the memory of which still thrilled his pulses, tugged at his heart-strings. Over the snow-capped hills he rode, wrapped in military furs, his sabre clanking by his side and a storm of stinging sleet driven into his face. Below were lights flashing in a white wilderness—amongst the hills flared the red fire of the guns, the music of their thunders was even then upon his ears. Down the steep defile he rode at the head of his troop, the sound of their approach muffled by the deep snow—afterwards the roar of meeting, the breathless excitement of the charge, the deep battle-cry of the men of Theos and from those others—ah, he had it now.

"Ho-e-la! Ho-e-la! Allah! Allah!"

A cry of triumph. The game was over. Sara Van Decht threw herself into a chair between her father and him and fanned herself vigorously with a pocket-handkerchief. The others were laughing and talking

amongst themselves. Erlito came over at once to her side.

"Miss Van Decht," he cried, gaily, "we are invincible. You played magnificently. Reist, we are going to have some tea, and then I shall be at your service. Why, our tussle seems to have interested you."

Reist withdrew his eyes reluctantly from watching Hassen. He smiled faintly.

"Yes," he said. "New things are always interesting! New things—and old friends!"

CHAPTER IV

AFTERNOON tea was brought in by an elderly man-servant in plain livery, and was probably the most unconventional meal which Reist had ever shared. They sat about promiscuously upon chairs and overturned boxes, and there was a good deal of lively conversation. Brand was a newspaper man, who had served as war correspondent with Erlito in the Egyptian campaign, Mr. Van Decht and his daughter were rich Americans, loitering about Europe. Hassen remained silent, and of him Reist learned nothing further. The little which he knew sufficed.

Brand came over and sat by Reist's side. He was a tall, fair man, with keen eyes and weather-beaten skin—by no means unlike Erlito, save that his shoulders were not so broad, and he lacked the military carriage.

"I am interested in your country, Duke," he said. "You are making history there. It seems to me that it may become European history."

"Theos has fallen upon evil times," Reist answered. "All that we pray of Europe is that we may be left alone. If that be granted us we shall right ourselves."

Sara Van Decht looked across at him with frank interest.

"Do you come from Theos, Duke?" she asked.

Reist bowed.

"I have lived there all my life," he said, "and I know it better than any other place.

"It is a very beautiful country," he continued, "and very dear to its people. To strangers, though, and specially you who have been brought up in America, I must confess that we should probably seem outside the pale of civilization."

"Tell me why," she asked. "What are you so backward in?"

"Luxuries," he answered. "We have no electric light."

"It is detestable," she exclaimed.

"No street cars."

"They are abominable!"

Reist smiled quietly.

"We have scarcely any railways," he said, "and the telephone is rare enough to be a curiosity."

She laughed back at him, and gave her empty cup to Brand.

"Primitivism," she declared, "is quite the most delightful thing in the world. Then your politics, too, must be most exciting. You have revolutions, and that sort of thing, do you not?"

"I do not understand you, Miss Van Decht," he said, quietly. "Will you not tell me what you mean?"

"The papers are all so vague," she answered, "but one gathers that Theos is in a state of political unrest. I believe in South America they would call that a revolution."

Reist's eyes flashed fire. A faint smile flickered upon Hassen's lips.

"There is not any comparison," he said, haughtily, "any possible comparison, between the affairs of one of

the most ancient and historical countries in Europe and the mushroom States of South America. Theos, it is true, has made mistakes, and she will suffer for them—she is suffering now."

"The Republic, for example," Hassen remarked, quietly.

"Theos," Reist answered, "is a country in which the Republican instinct is as yet unborn. Her sons are homely and brave, tillers of the soil, or soldiers. We have few cities to corrupt, and very little attempt at the education which makes shopkeepers and anarchists of honest men. Perhaps that is why we have kept our independence. Ay, kept it, although hemmed in with false friends and open enemies."

Reist spoke with fervour, a fire in his dark eyes, a note of passion vibrating in his slow tones. The girl especially watched him with keen interest. To her all this was new and incredible. She was used to men to whom self-restraint was amongst the cardinal virtues, to the patriotism of torchlight processions and fire-crackers. This was all so different, it was as though some one had turned back for her the pages of history. . . . Reist surely was not of this generation? Erlito had averted his face, Hassen was busy lighting a cigarette, Mr. Van Decht was as bewildered as his daughter. Yet Reist's words, in a way, had moved all of them. It was Hassen who answered.

"If the Republican instinct," he remarked, quietly, "is as yet unborn in Theos, whence the banishment of the Tyrnaus family, and the establishment of a Republican government?"

Reist turned full upon him, and his eyes were like the eyes of an angry lion.

"Maurice of Tyrnaus," he said, "was one of the degenerates of a noble race. I say no more against one whom, if alive, I should still acknowledge as my King."

Hassen shrugged his shoulders.

"You are a long way from Theos, Count," he remarked, pointedly. "You took, I presume, the oath of allegiance to the Republic when it was formed?"

"That is a false saying," Reist answered, scornfully. "I neither took the oath nor recognized the government."

"Yet they allowed you to remain in the capital city?" Hassen asked.

"There was no one," Reist answered, "who would have dared to bid me depart. Of the ancient nobility of Theos we alone remain, alas, close dwellers in our native country. Else Metzger had been hung in the market-place with short shrift—he a merchant, a trafficker in coin, who dared to sit in the ancient Council House of Theos and weave his cursed treason. And listen, sir," he continued, turning abruptly upon Hassen. "You would know whence sprang that evil weed of a Republic! I will tell you. It was the work of foreign spies working with foreign gold amongst the outcasts and scum of Theos. It was not the choice of the people. It was the word of sedition, of cunning bribery, the vile underhand efforts of foreign politicians seeking to weaken by treachery a country they dared not, small though it is, provoke to battle."

There followed a strange, tense silence. No one thought of interruption. They held their breath and

waited. The conversation which had started harmlessly enough had become a duel. The grim shadow of tragedy seemed suddenly to have stalked in amongst them. Hassen sprang to his feet, livid, his coal-black eyes on fire. Reist was facing him, his head thrown back, passionate, contemptuous, bitter. With a swift, threatening gesture he threw out his arm towards his adversary.

"Hassen Bey," he said, "my private enemies I meet under the roof of my friends, and courtesy demands that I hold my peace and pass on. The enemies of my country I denounce at all times, and in all places. You are a Turkish spy, one of those of whom I have been speaking, who sought the hospitality of Theos only to scatter gold amongst the common people to plot and intrigue for your master, the Sultan. Oh, I know that you are also a soldier and a brave man, for I have met you face to face in battle, and may God grant that I do so again. Yet you are a spy and a treacherous rogue, and I am very thankful that I have come here to tell you so, and to order you to leave this roof."

Hassen had recovered himself. He turned to Erlito.

"The Duke of Reist," he said, quietly, "is a friend of yours. Perhaps it is better that I should go. I regret very much to have been the passive cause of such an outbreak. Miss Van Decht, you will accept my apologies."

Erlito was very grave. He did not seem to see the hand which Hassen held out to him.

"Hassen," he said, "we have been friends, but I do not understand these things which the Duke of Reist

has said of you. You have spoken of yourself as a Frenchman—of Theos or of Turkey I have heard nothing. Have you any explanation to offer?"

Hassen shrugged his shoulders lightly.

"My dear Erlito," he said, "the Duke of Reist is an honest man, but—he will forgive me—he is an anachronism. He should have lived two centuries ago—or, better still, he would have made an excellent crusader. The necessities of modern diplomacy are unknown to him. He has passed all his days in a semi-civilized country. He is not a fitting judge of the things which happen to-day."

A sudden lightning flashed in Erlito's blue eyes. He drew himself to his full height, and pointed towards the door.

"That semi-civilized country, sir, is mine also, and if you are one of those who have sought to corrupt it, I beg that you will leave this room while you may with a whole skin. At once, sir!"

The imperturbability of the man was clearly disturbed. He looked at Erlito in amazement. The face of Nicholas of Reist shone with joy.

"Your country?" Hassen repeated, incredulously. "What have you to do with Theos?"

Erlito hesitated—not so Reist. He stepped forward, and the leaping firelight threw a strange glow upon his pale, mobile features.

"After all," he cried to Hassen, "it seems that you are but a poor fool of a conspirator. I will do you an honour which you ill deserve. I will present you to his Royal Highness, Prince Ughtred, of Tyrnaus."

"Gracious!"

The single monosyllable—from Sara Van Decht—was the only speech which broke the amazed silence. She was leaning forward in her chair, gazing eagerly at the three men, her beautiful eyes eloquent with excitement—a crown of fire gleaming in her brown-gold hair. No one noticed her. Hassen, who had regained his composure, but in whose face was written a deep self-disgust, moved towards the door. With his fingers upon the handle he paused and looked back at the little group.

"You are both," he said, in a low tone, "a little hard upon a soldier, and a servant of the Sultan, with whom obedience is forced to become an instinct. Of that—no more. But there is one thing which you may call me as often and as thoroughly as you will, for it is as true as the Koran, that I am an absolute—a blind fool!"

He passed out, and they heard him singing for the lift. Sara Van Decht looked up at Brand, who was sitting next to her. Her half-whispered remark dissolved the situation.

"I suppose that we are all awake," she said. "I feel as though I wanted to pinch myself to be sure of it."

CHAPTER V

"And what has brought you to London, Nicholas, my friend?" Erlito asked. "Is it pleasure, or you have perhaps a mission to the English Government?"

It was the great moment. Reist, too restless to sit down, stood upon the hearthrug, the angry fire lingering in his eyes, a spot of dull colour burning still in his cheeks. He had not yet got over the shock of finding one of the men he most hated and despised in life a guest in this house of all others.

"Pleasure," he repeated, thoughtfully. "People would call me a fanatic, yet nevertheless, Ughtred, this is the truth. There is no pleasure for me outside my country. The life of the European capitals chokes me. There is a tawdriness about them all, something artificial and unreal. I do not know how to describe it, but it is there—in Petersburg, in Paris, in London and Vienna. It is like a gigantic depression. I seem to become in them a puppet, a shadow walking across a great stage. Always I am longing to be back in Theos—in Theos where the winds blow down from the hills, and the faces of the men and women in the streets are clean with health. Ah, my friend, I know what you would say. The great cities, too, with their factories and huge buildings which shut out the sky, they are part of God's earth. The smoke which stains the heavens comes from the making of useful and beautiful things. Yet I watch

my peasants tilling their little farms, tending their hillside vineyards, without luxuries, without knowledge of luxuries, ever light-hearted, contented, strong and healthy as children of the earth should be. The love of that little strip of land of theirs is the keynote of their patriotism. It is a passion, a joy to them. Oh, do you wonder that I think these things are best!"

Erlito's eyes were full of sympathy. His head sank upon his folded arms. His thoughts travelled backwards. It was so many years ago, yet he could remember.

"Listen, Nicholas," he said. "I have travelled much more than you. I have been in many strange countries and seen life under many strange conditions. But all the while there has been a pain in my heart. I have found no home. I, too, love Theos! There will come a day when no sentence of banishment will keep me away."

Reist looked up. The moment had come.

"That day," he said, "may be nearer than you think. Ughtred, I have left Theos on no slight business. I am here with a mission, and my mission is to you!"

Erlito's eyes were full of questioning wonder.

"The accursed Republic," Reist continued, "has fallen like a pack of cards. There is panic in the city and throughout the country. Theos knows now that she has been deceived and misguided, that she has been brought to the very verge of ruin. The Powers no longer continue to assure her of their protection. A sovereign and a Tyrnaus had ever a claim upon them, not so this bastard and bungling Republic. The city is

full of Russian spies, the Austrians watch us night and day, the Turks are creeping up even to the Balkans. Rumours of partition have reached us from the great Cabinets. Ughtred of Tyrnaus, there is only one man to-day who can save the country, and that man is you."

Erlito dropped his pipe, and leaned forward in his chair.

"Are you mocking me, Reist?" he asked.

"May God forbid," Reist answered, fervently, "that I should speak idle words upon such a subject. The people of Theos are still brave and true, and their freedom is as dear to them as life itself. They came to me, who for long have lived apart, and I have shown them what I truthfully believe to be their only chance of salvation. You are that chance, Ughtred. The throne of your fathers is yours if you will have it. A brave man can seize it, and a brave man can hold it in the teeth of all Europe, and by your God and for the sake of the blood which is in your veins, Ughtred of Tyrnaus, I summon you to return with me to Theos."

Erlito rose slowly up. His cheeks were flushed with excitement. Reist's appeal had moved him deeply.

"You mean this?" he said. "You mean that you bring me this message from the people of Theos?"

Reist raised his hand solemnly.

"I mean that on their behalf I, Nicholas of Reist, than whom none has a better right to speak for their country, offer you the crown of Theos."

Erlito walked restlessly up and down the little study into which he had brought his visitor.

"We of Tyrnaus," he said, "are under sentence of perpetual exile."

"It was the illegal sentence of an illegal assembly," Reist answered. "The voice of the people has revoked it. They bid you forget all else save that your native land looks to you in her hour of trouble. Listen. It is no rose-strewn way along which you will pass to your inheritance. There will be no popular reception, no grand ceremony. We must travel day and night to Theos, secretly, perhaps even in disguise. You must be crowned King in the Palace the moment we arrive there. Secretly I have already called together the army, for the moment the news is known there will be a storm. There are Russians and Austrian secret agents in Theos, each working for their own ends. They believe that I have gone to Vienna and Petersburg to beg for the intercession of the Powers. Meanwhile the Turkish dogs are creeping up the Balkans. They are gathered around our country, Ughtred, like wreckers waiting for the ship to break up. It is for you to steer that ship into safe waters."

There was a long silence. Erlito was standing with his elbow upon the mantelpiece, looking into the fire. In his heart were many emotions, in his face a strange light. A new world had been opened up before him. He saw great things moving across the vista of the future. No longer then need he brood over an empty life, or bewail the idle sword of a gentleman of fortune. Here was stuff enough to make a dozen careers, a future, successful or unsuccessful, more brilliant than anything else which he could have conceived. But Reist, who failed to read his companion's thoughts, was troubled. This prolonged silence was inexplicable to him.

"You do not hesitate?" he asked at last.

Erlito laughed and drew himself up.

"You must not think so ill of me as that, Nicholas," he answered. "Nay, there was no thought of hesitation in my mind. I accept—gladly, thankfully. Only you must know this. Of soldiering I have learnt a little, and nothing would make me happier than to lead the men of Theos into battle. But of statesmanship I know little, and of kingcraft nothing at all. You must find me faithful advisers. You yourself must stand at my right hand."

Then Nicholas of Reist drew a long breath, and the cloud passed away from his face.

"There are still many faithful citizens," he said, "whom we can rally around us, and I myself—I live only for Theos. Let me tell you this, for it will give you confidence. It is a soldier for whom the people are pining. They want no more merchants in high places. They shall see you, Ughtred of Tyrnaus, in the uniform of their Guards. They shall hear you give the word of command, they will shout you King—ay, they will take you into their hearts, this people."

So the hands of the two met in a long, fervent clasp. Erlito embraced his destiny, and Reist set the seal upon his renunciation.

* * * * * *

A King! As Ughtred fastened his white tie before the tiny mirror upon his dressing-case those lines at the corner of his mouth gave way. He suddenly burst out laughing. A King! The incongruity of the thing tickled his sense of humour—he laughed long and heart-

ily. He looked around him. His bedchamber was tiny, and he had only been able to afford furniture of the cheapest description. He looked at the plain rush carpet, the swords and foils which were almost his sole decoration upon the walls, the humble appointments of his dressing-table. Everything was scrupulously neat and clean, stern and soldier-like in simplicity. What a change was before him. From here to the royal palace of Theos, where a chamberlain would wait upon him with bended knee, and the small etiquette of a Court would hamper his every movement. The last few years passed in swift review before him. He had lived always like a gentleman, but always with a certain amount of rigid self-denial necessitated by his small income. He had few acquaintances and fewer friends. The luxury of a West-End club had been denied to him—fencing and long walks were almost his sole relaxation. All that he had had to hope for was the breaking out of some small war in any corner of the world, when his sword and military experience might give him a chance to follow his profession. He was, if anything, deficient in imagination, but he had humour enough and to spare. He laughed softly as he donned his carefully-folded and well-worn dress-coat, and reflected that this was perhaps the last dinner which he would eat in such garments with companions of his own choosing. It was surely a strange turn in the wheel of fortune.

CHAPTER VI

"I THINK your friend the Duke of Reist is a very interesting man," Sara Van Decht remarked, "but as a dinner companion he's just a little depressing. I wonder what father and he will find to talk about."

Ughtred laughed. They had just come out from the restaurant, to find the great hall almost full. Reist and Mr. Van Decht were sitting a little apart from them.

"Reist is a very good fellow," Ughtred declared, "but just now he is not very much in the humour for gaiety. He is passionately attached to his country, and Theos, alas, is passing through a very anxious time in her history. No, you must not judge him by his demeanour to-night. I had much difficulty in persuading him to accept your father's invitation."

She nodded sympathetically.

"Has he come over to obtain aid from England?" she asked. "From the papers this morning it seems as though one of the Powers would have to interfere and straighten things out."

Ughtred looked down with grave, steadfast eyes into the girl's upturned face. It was time for him to tell her. How ridiculous it would sound. She would probably laugh at him.

"Reist came to England," he said, "to find me."

She looked at him in mild wonder.

"You! But you are no longer interested in Theos, are you?"

He sighed.

"I have been an exile for many years," he said, "and Theos has come to mean little else to me save a beautiful memory. Yet I have never forgotten that she is my native country. I am never likely to forget it."

"Do you hope ever to return?" she asked.

"I hope to be in Theos within a week," he answered. "I am returning with Reist."

She looked up at him startled, but deeply interested.

"You mean it?" she cried. "Oh, tell me!"

"You have read of the downfall of the Republic," he continued. "Reist assures me that the people will never tolerate another. They speak already of a King, and, Miss Van Decht—you must not laugh, please—I am the only surviving member of the royal family of Theos."

She gasped.

"You are to be King!" she exclaimed.

"The people have sent for me," he answered, simply. "Of course there are difficulties, and after all it may not come to pass. Still, the crown is mine by right, and I am going to strike a blow for it. We leave for Theos to-morrow."

"A King! To-morrow!" she repeated, vaguely.

She was bereft of words. Ughtred laughed nervously.

"Miss Van Decht," he said, "it isn't altogether a prospect of fairyland. There are many things to be given up. There are many things which a man may possess but a King can only covet. I have become somewhat of a Bohemian in my wanderings, and my

freedom is very dear to me. Yet I think that I am doing right in making this attempt. I love Theos, and it will be a joy to fight her battles. I love the old city and the mountains and the wild country. I may not be a patriot like Nicholas of Reist, but the old war music seems to leap and burn in my blood when I think of the Turks creeping nearer and nearer to the frontier, and our ancient city full of foreign spies, gathered together like carrion birds before the massacre. It is intolerable!"

She was thoughtful and sympathetic.

"Yes," she said, softly; "it is right that you should feel like that. Ours is a new country, and there is nothing about her beautiful or historic. Yet, if she were in danger—oh, yes, I understand. You are right to go. May you be successful!"

A crash of martial music from the band filled the air with ringing melody, and for a moment they sat silent. Ughtred took up his as yet unlit cigarette, and Sara sipped her coffee. Around them were little groups of men and brilliantly-dressed women. The pleasant hum of conversation and light laughter came to them with something of an inspiring ring. Down the broad promenade two men were walking. Sara touched her companion on the arm with her fan.

"Look!" she whispered.

Ughtred recognized Hassen with a frown, and his companion with a sudden thrill of interest. They were coming slowly down from the restaurant, talking earnestly together, and by the side of the tall, distinguished-looking man, who was listening to him

with so inscrutable a countenance, Hassen appeared almost insignificant. Nicholas of Reist, who had moved from his chair to fetch an evening paper, met them face to face. He would have passed on with a contemptuous glance at Hassen, but that the older man turned and accosted him with grave yet pleasant courtesy.

"The Duke of Reist is far from home! This is indeed a surprising meeting."

Reist started as he recognized the speaker. He cast a single lightning-like glance at Hassen, who lingered by.

"It is as welcome as surprising," Reist answered, quietly. "I had promised myself the pleasure of paying my respects at the Embassy to-morrow."

"You will not, I trust, let anything interfere with so amiable an intention," was the suave reply. "You and I should have much to say to each other, Reist. You have a vacant chair here, I see. Will you allow me to take my coffee with you?"

"I shall be much honoured," Reist answered, quietly. "As you say, there is much which we might discuss. Will you permit me to introduce you to my friends?"

The faintest indication of surprise was followed by a murmur of delighted assent. Hassen, perplexed and white with anger, moved away. The two men threaded the little maze of chairs and palm trees and women's skirts, and reached the corner where Sara and Ughtred sat. Reist gravely performed the introduction.

"Miss Van Decht, will you allow me to present to you the Prince Alexis of Ollendirk, Miss Van Decht—Mr. Van Decht. Ughtred, I am sure you two should

know one another. Prince Alexis of Ollendirk, Ughtred of Tyrnaus."

The Prince, who had bowed low and gracefully to Sara, held out his hand frankly to Ughtred.

"To number Tyrnaus amongst one's acquaintances," he said, "has been an honour for centuries. I knew your father, Prince Ughtred. His Majesty was always very good to me. The Gold Star of Theos is amongst the most treasured of my possessions."

More coffee was ordered by Mr. Van Decht, and cigarettes. A measured and somewhat curious conversation followed. The Russian Ambassador talked to Sara chiefly. Ughtred seemed to interest him only as a pleasantly-met acquaintance. They exchanged views on Paris and Vienna, and Prince Alexis pleaded eloquently for the charms of his own city. With consummate skill he led the conversation to Theos.

"The most picturesque country in Europe," he declared, "to-day I fear the most unfortunate. You see, Mr. Van Decht," he continued, turning towards him, "it is not always that a great country can exist and be developed upon democratic principles. Theos, under the royal House of Tyrnaus, had at least a recognized place amongst the European States. To-day she has lost it. Of her future—no man can speak with certainty."

The Russian leaned back and lit a cigarette. Yet Reist felt that he was being watched by those half-closed, sleepy eyes. He leaned a little forward and lowered his voice.

"I am a man of Theos, bred and born," he said,

slowly, "and the future of my country is as my own future. I am not in this bastard government, as you doubtless know, Prince Alexis, but I have the confidence of the people. They have come to me for counsel, they have asked me how best they can secure their continued independence. It is a great emergency this, and since we have met here I am venturing to ask for your advice. You have a precise knowledge of the situation, you know the country, the people, our environment. How best do you think that I could answer them?"

The Russian smoked thoughtfully for a moment. In the little clouds of blue smoke which hung about his head he seemed to be seeking for inspiration. Was this simplicity, he wondered, or had Reist indeed a hidden purpose in seeking to make him declare himself?

"It is not an easy question which you ask, my friend," he answered at last. "Yet, after all, I doubt whether more than one course is open to those who would direct the destinies of your country. Theos is a weak State hemmed in by powerful ones. She is to-day the certain prey of whomever might stretch out his hand—even her ancient enemy the Turk. So, after all, it is not difficult to offer you good advice. I would say to you this: Let her seek out the strongest, the most generous of those environing Powers, and say to her frankly, 'Give me your protection,' and I believe that for the sake of peace her prayer would be promptly answered."

Reist was silent. Ughtred, who had been listening intently, interposed.

"The advice," he said, "sounds well, but it seems to

me to have one weak point. It is her independence which Theos seeks above all things to retain. The protection of any one Power must surely jeopardize this."

"By no means," Prince Alexis answered, blandly. "Let us take my own country for example. Russia is great enough and generous enough to befriend a weakened state without any question of a *quid pro quo*. A love of peace is the one great passion which sways my master in all his dealings. For the sake of it he would do more even than this."

"The Czar does not stand alone," Reist remarked, thoughtfully. "He has many advisers."

"To whom he listens," Prince Alexis answered, "when it pleases him. It is said in this country, yes, and in others, that the Czar is a puppet. We who know only smile. For, my dear Reist, it is true that there has not reigned in Europe for many years a greater autocrat than he who sits on the throne of Russia to-day. But to return to the subject of Theos. Your danger seems to me to lie here. Supposing that the present state of disquiet continues, or any form of government be set up which does not seem to promise permanent stability. Then it is very likely that those stronger countries by whom Theos is surrounded may, in the general interests of peace, deem it their duty to interfere."

"Theos," Reist said, proudly, "is not yet a moribund State. She has an army, and at the first hint of invasion all political differences would cease."

Prince Alexis smiled, and raised his tiny glass of liqueur.

"Floreat Theos!" he said, lightly. "Long may she continue to retain her independence—and to know her friends."

They all raised their glasses. From Reist came a whisper, little more than a breath —

"Long live the King!"

CHAPTER VII

Prince Alexis made the toast the signal for his departure, murmuring something about a diplomatic reception which his duty forbade him to ignore. In the lobby Hassen brushed up against him.

"A word with your Highness outside," he murmured.

The Ambassador signified assent by a scarcely-noticeable gesture. He lit a cigarette and leisurely buttoned his fur coat. A swift glance towards the little party in the corner showed him that Reist was missing.

"You had better slip into my carriage quietly," he said to Hassen. "Our good friend the Duke of Reist is on the lookout somewhere, and it would be better that he did not see us together."

Hassen nodded, and preceded the Ambassador, who lingered to speak to some acquaintance. In a few moments he followed, pausing with his foot upon the carriage steps as though to re-light his cigarette. He looked quickly up and down the pavement. At the corner of Pall Mall and the Haymarket a man was standing with his face half turned in their direction. He shrugged his shoulders and entered the carriage.

"The Duke of Reist is interested," he remarked to Hassen. "Come, my friend, what have you to say?"

"First of all, then," Hassen began, "your bribe to

Metzger was large, but you will never get your money's worth. You have worked hard for the political disruption of Theos. It may chance that you have failed utterly."

The Ambassador nodded pleasantly.

"Possibly," he admitted. "I do not quite follow you, though. Metzger has been chased from the country. There is no government, no law, no order. The Powers cannot permit this to continue. A protectorship will be proposed within a week."

"It will be four days too late," Hassen answered. "In less time than that Theos will occupy a stronger position politically than ever before."

"You surprise me," the Ambassador admitted, politely.

"Do you think that the Duke of Reist is the sort of man to be dining at London restaurants whilst his country bleeds to death!" Hassen exclaimed. "Bah! His presence here with Ughtred of Tyrnaus to-night is no chance affair. There is a deep scheme on, and broadly I have fathomed it."

"Yes?"

"Theos has had enough of Republics. She is going to try a King. It is Reist himself who put the idea into their heads. He has come as the envoy of the people to Ughtred of Tyrnaus."

"That," the Ambassador remarked, "will not do at all."

"You think so, knowing nothing of Ughtred of Tyrnaus. I know him well, and if you wish Theos to become a Russian province he is the very man in

Europe to baulk you. He is brave, shrewd, patriotic, and a fine soldier. If he ever reaches Theos the people will worship him. He will make order out of chaos. He will hold the reins and he will be proof against the wiles of your agents. Short of absolute force you will not be able to dislodge him."

"He must not reach Theos," the Ambassador said, thoughtfully. "The man's very physique will win him the throne . . . and I believe that you are right. The House of Tyrnaus has never been friendly towards Russia. What will your master say, Hassen?"

The man smiled grimly.

"Do we want a soldier King in Theos?" he asked, "when our soldiers are creeping northwards to the Balkans day by day? You are ready to seize by intrigue and by stealth—we are preparing to strike a blow of another sort."

The Ambassador smiled. The Turkish soldiers were brave enough, but in Constantinople at that moment was a Russian envoy on secret business, who had very definite instructions as to the occupation of Theos. It is possible, however, that Prince Alexis had forgotten the fact, for he did not mention it.

"At least," he said, "one thing is clear. Ughtred of Tyrnaus must be delayed."

Hassen shrugged his shoulders. The gesture was expressive.

"It will be worth—say five thousand pounds to you," the Ambassador remarked, carelessly, "to make sure of it."

Hassen nodded and stepped out of the carriage.

They had drawn up before one of the embassies, and his arrival with Prince Alexis was not a thing to be advertised.

"I shall do my best," he said, slipping away in the crowd.

* * * * * *

"Why, yes, I shall miss you. Isn't that natural?"

"I hope so," he answered. "I shall never forget these days." She laughed gaily. The music was playing something very soft and low. Reist had not yet reappeared.

"Isn't that a little rash, my friend? You love experiences, and you are going to enter upon a very wonderful life. You are much to be envied."

"Sara," he said, "you must come to Theos."

She laughed outright in frank and unrestrained merriment.

"You must talk to father," she said. "I dare say he will come. He loves new countries. Only I'm sure he won't behave properly at Court. He's a terrible democrat, and he likes to shake hands with everybody."

"He shall shake hands with me as often as he likes," Ughtred said. "You must remember, Sara, that royalty in Theos is not exactly like royalty in this country. Why, my whole domain is not so large as some English counties. I mean to go about my kingdom exactly like a private individual. Come to Theos, and we will play racquets in the throne room."

She shook her head.

"The smaller the kingdom, as a rule," she said, "the

more circumstance and etiquette surround the Court. I do not think that you will be allowed to play racquets in the throne room, or to shake hands very often with a Chicago stock-jobber, even though he is my father. We shall come and gaze upon you from afar."

"So long as you will come," he replied, confidently, "we will see about the rest. Do you know, Sara, it would almost spoil everything if I felt that this change in my life were to disturb—our friendship."

She drew a long palm leaf through her fingers and let it fall regretfully. It was cool and pleasant to the touch. A violin, hidden somewhere amongst the waving green, sent strange notes of melody out through the court, and a little man, bravely dressed in scarlet and yellow, bobbed up and down over his instrument. The girl was thinking—wondering! It was so sudden a change, this. Ughtred Erlito had been a delightful friend—but Ughtred of Tyrnaus! It was so strange a transition. She kept her eyes fixed upon the marble floor, and her heart beat for a moment or two to the sad music of the wailing violin. Then she sprang to her feet—the folly had passed. With one sudden movement one of the little ornaments hanging from her bracelet became detached and rolled away. Ughtred recovered it, and would have fastened it upon the gold wire, but she stopped him.

"It is my four-leaved clover," she said. "See, I shall give it to you. May it bring you good fortune. Floreat Theos!"

He held it in his palm—a dainty ornament set with diamonds and quaintly shaped.

"Do you mean it?" he asked.

"Why, of course," she answered. "If it is not exactly a coronation present, it will at least help to remind you—of the days before you were a King."

"I need no trinkets to remind me of some things," he answered, quietly, "but Theos will give me nothing which I shall prize more than this. I shall keep it, too, as a pledge of your promise. You will come to Theos?"

"Yes, I will come," she answered.

Nicholas of Reist was by their side, dark, almost saturnine in his black evening clothes and tie. His presence had a chilling effect upon them both. Sara rose to her feet.

"Will you see if you can find father?" she said to Ughtred. "He was talking to some Americans who went into the restaurant."

He moved away. She turned quickly to Reist.

"I wanted to ask you," she said. "You live in Theos, and you can give me an idea. What is there that I can send Prince Ughtred for a coronation present?"

"That is a very difficult question to answer," Reist said. "Will you not be a little more explicit? A steam yacht would be a present, so would a cigarette-case."

She nodded quickly.

"Yes! I should have explained. Money is of no consequence at all. I had thought of a team of horses and a coach."

He was suddenly serious. He eyed the girl with a new curiosity. She then was one of the daughters of

this new world before whose golden key every Court in Europe had yielded. She was of striking appearance, perhaps beautiful, instinctively well bred. She might be destined to play a part in the affairs of Theos.

"'Money is of no consequence at all,'" he repeated, thoughtfully. "We are poor folk in Theos, Miss Van Decht, and we do not often hear such words."

"Sometimes I think," she said, "that our wealth is our misfortune. Now you understand, don't you? Prince Ughtred was very kind to us at Cairo and on the voyage back, and we have seen quite a little of him in London. I should like to give him something really useful. Please suggest something."

"I will take you at your word then, Miss Van Decht," he answered. "Send him a Maxim-Nordenfeld gun. If you want to be magnificent, send him a battery."

She looked at him in amazement.

"Do you mean it?" she exclaimed.

"I do," he answered. "Prince Ughtred is a very keen soldier, and he is never tired of praising these guns. For the first year or two at the least we shall have troublous times, and a battery of maxims might save all our lives and the throne. Theos has, alas, no money to spend in artillery, though her soldiers are as brave as any in the world."

"Father and I will see about it to-morrow," she declared. "Hush! here they come."

Ughtred was approaching with her father, and watching him it occurred to her for the first time how well his new part in life would become him. He was tall and

broad, and he moved with the free, easy dignity of a soldier accustomed to command.

"I have found your father," he said, "and your carriage is waiting. I thought that if Reist would excuse me for half-an-hour ——"

Reist interrupted him at once.

"You must not go away," he declared, earnestly. "Not for five minutes. Believe me it is necessary."

"My dear fellow ——" Ughtred protested.

"Is it possible," Reist exclaimed, with some impatience, "that you do not recognize the great misfortune of this evening? I was wrong to allow you to come—to be seen in London with you. Prince Alexis is more than an ordinary ambassador. He is a born diplomatist, a true Russian—he is one of the clique who to-day rule the country. With Hassen's aid he has, without a doubt, surmised the purport of my visit to you. By this time he is hard at work. Let me tell you that if he can prevent it you will never set foot in Theos. There must be no more delay. Come!"

Sarah held out her hand. Her eyes met his frankly.

"The Duke of Reist must be obeyed," she said. "I am sure that he is right. Good-bye, Prince Ughtred! You are very fortunate, for you have a great and noble work before you. May you succeed in it. I shall hope and pray for your success."

A little abruptly she turned away and took her father's arm. The two men watched them disappear—the little grey-headed man with his ill-cut clothes, and hard, shrewd face, and the tall, graceful girl, whose toilette was irreproachable, and whose carriage and bearing

moved even Reist to admiration. They passed down the carpeted way and through the swing-doors. Then Reist touched his companion on the arm.

"It is half-past eleven," he said. "We are going to catch the twelve o'clock train from Charing Cross."

CHAPTER VIII

THE whistle sounded at last, the train began to glide slowly away from the almost deserted platform. But at the last moment a man came running through the booking-office, and made for one of the compartments. He tugged at the handle, wrenched it open, and was preparing for a flying leap when an inspector seized him. There was an altercation, a violent struggle—the man was left upon the platform. Reist drew a long breath of relief as he settled down in his corner.

"The way these things are managed in England," he said, "it is excellent."

Ughtred shrugged his shoulders. Reist had been dumb for the last half-hour, and he was puzzled.

"Will you tell me now," he asked, "the meaning of it all?"

"The meaning of it all is—Hassen!" Reist answered. "How long have you known him?"

"We fought together in Abyssinia," Ughtred answered, "and I found him always a capital soldier and a pleasant companion."

"Did you ever ask him where he learnt his soldiering?"

"Once—yes!"

"Did he tell you?"

"I do not think that he did. He told me frankly enough that he had no past—that it was not to be re-

ferred to. There were others like that in the campaign, men who had secrets to bury, men who sought forgetfulness, even that forgetfulness which a bullet brings. We were a strange company enough. But the fighting was good."

"And since then you have met him again in England?"

"I met him at a little fencing-academy six months ago, and since then we have fenced together continually. But for your recognition of him I should have written him down as harmless."

A spot of colour burned in Reist's cheek. He ground his heel into the mat.

"Harmless! He! A Turk! A Russian spy! A double-dealing rogue. Sword in hand I have chased him through the Kurdistan valley all one night, and if I had caught him then Russia would have lost a tool and the Sultan a traitorous soldier. He holds still, although an absentee, a high command in the Turkish army, and all the while he is in the pay of Russia. Prince Alexis knows of my mission to you by now, and if we reach Theos we are lucky, for I do not think that a Tyrnaus upon the throne of Theos would suit Russia at all."

"I may seem stupid," Ughtred said, seriously, "but it is necessary that I should understand these things. Why should Russia object so much to my reinstatement upon the throne of my fathers? Surely of all the nations of Europe one would expect from her the least sympathy with a democratic form of government."

"Russia is above all sympathies or antipathies," Reist answered, bitterly. "She is the most self-centred, the most absolutely selfish nation on earth. The present

state of turmoil in Theos is owing largely to the efforts of Muscovite secret agents. Russia desires a weak Theos. She wants to stand behind the government and pull the strings. It is she whom we have most to fear now."

Ughtred lit a cigar and leaned back in his corner. He was still in his evening clothes, and he looked doubtfully at the window-panes streaming with rain.

"Neither Russia nor her agents can interfere with us on neutral soil," he remarked. "I wish, Reist, that you had let me send for my bag. I shall be a very dilapidated object by the time we reach the frontier."

"My wardrobe," Reist answered, "is at your service immediately we are upon the boat. I am smaller than you, but I have some things which may be useful. Now I will tell you something which will help to explain my haste. When first I saw Hassen and Prince Alexis together I understood that we must change our plans, and I sent for your bag. Your rooms were then being watched front and back. My servant bribed a postman to go to your door and ask for you. He discovered that a gentleman was already in your rooms waiting for you. They are very much in earnest, these people, my Prince. It will need all our wit to reach Theos."

"We will reach it, though," Ughtred said, softly. "We are on our guard, and there can be no means of forcibly detaining us. In a quarter of an hour we shall be at Dover."

Reist nodded. He was examining the chambers of a revolver which he had drawn from the pocket of a loose ulster.

"Let us remember," he said, "to avoid all strangers

and to speak to no one unless compelled. We know nothing of Theos. We are returning to Budapesth, and, Prince Ughtred, there is a revolver in the pocket of your coat also, not for use but for show. We must not be led into a disturbance with any one. Mind, it is the policy of every one to detain us if once the object of our journey is known. In Germany we shall not be safe, in Austria every moment will be perilous. But once across the frontier nothing will avail. I had news from Theos this morning. The people are on fire for your coming."

The train slackened speed. The lights of Dover flashed out on either side. They drew up at the town station and waited there for some minutes. Reist let down the window and addressed a porter.

"Why do we not go on to the harbour?" he asked. "We are already late."

"There is a special coming in just behind you, sir," the man answered. "We shall send you both along together."

Reist thanked him and turned to Ughtred with a little laugh.

"So we are to have a travelling companion," he remarked, dryly. "Our friends are not to be caught asleep. We must watch for the occupant of this special train. We shall know then against whom we have to be upon our guard."

They moved slowly on again. Behind them was an engine and a single carriage. Reist let down both windows, and a fresh salt wind blew in upon their faces. In a few moments they were at the landing-stage.

Reist leaped lightly out, and Ughtred followed him. Opposite was the gangway leading to the steamer, through which a little crowd of passengers were already elbowing their way. They lingered on its outskirts and watched the single carriage drawn by the second engine. It drew up within a few feet of them, and a tall, fair young man handed out his portmanteau to one of the porters and leisurely descended on to the platform. Ughtred recognized him with a little exclamation of surprise.

"Why, it's Brand!"

He would have moved forward but for Reist's restraining arm.

"Wait! Who is he?"

"A newspaper man," Ughtred answered. "An honest fellow and a friend. I will answer for him."

"He was at your rooms with Hassen," Reist said, quickly. "I would trust no one whom I had seen with that man. Let him pass. We will follow him on board."

But it was too late. Brand possessed the quick, searching gaze of a journalist, and already, with a little start of surprise, he had recognized them.

"Erlito," he exclaimed. "What luck!"

Erlito shook hands with him, laughing. They turned towards the boat together.

"Have you become a millionaire, my friend," he asked, "that you must travel in special trains?"

Brand shook his head.

"Personally," he remarked, "I am in my usual lamentable state of impecuniosity. Nevertheless, for the

moment I am representing wealth illimitable. That is to say, I am in harness again."

Reist looked askance at them both. He did not understand. Ughtred was suddenly grave.

"I must ask you where you are going," he said. "There is no rumour of war, is there?"

Brand hesitated.

"Speaking broadly," he answered, "I have no right to tell you. But the circumstances of our meeting are peculiar. To tell you the truth, I am bound for Theos."

Reist's face was dark with anger—Ughtred's blank with amazement. Brand hastened to explain.

"The Duke of Reist," he said, "probably does not understand my position. I am a special correspondent to the *Daily Courier*. They send me at a moment's notice to any place where interesting events are likely to happen. Our chief has been studying the aspect of things in Theos, and half-an-hour ago I had my route. It was the same, Erlito, when I travelled with you to Abyssinia!"

Ughtred nodded thoughtfully.

"That is true," he remarked. "Reist, I am sure that we can trust Mr. Brand. He is not in league with any of those who would hinder us upon our journey."

"That may be so," Reist answered, "but he knows too much for our safety. There must be an understanding between us. A single paragraph in his newspaper to-morrow as to our journey, and we shall have as much chance of reaching the moon as Theos."

Brand, who was writing upon a telegraph-form,

paused at once. They were on the side of the steamer, remote from the bustle of departure, and almost alone.

"There is likely to be trouble, then, on the frontier, or before?" he inquired. "You have opponents?"

"So much so," Reist answered, fiercely, "that if we were in Theos now, and you talked of filling the newspapers with idle gossip of us and our affairs, we should not stop to argue the matter with you."

Brand laughed softly.

"I don't want to do you any harm," he said. "We must compromise matters."

Reist misunderstood him.

"An affair of money," he exclaimed. "I understand. We will give your paper one, two hundred pounds, to make no mention of Theos for a week."

Brand glanced at Ughtred with twinkling eyes.

"The special train which brought me here cost more than that, I am afraid," he said. "Believe me, Duke, it is not a matter of money at all. The proprietors of my paper are millionaires. What they want is information. When I spoke of a compromise I meant something entirely different."

"Perhaps you had better explain exactly what you mean," Reist said, curtly. "I do not understand this Western journalism. It is new to me."

Brand nodded.

"Good!" he said. "You want to keep this journey secret until you are safe in Theos. Very well, I will send no message to my people until you give me leave. Only you must supply me then with exclusive informa-

tion. And you must see that I am the first to cable it from your country."

"That is an agreement," Reist answered, solemnly. "If you will keep to that I am satisfied."

They were already in the Channel. A wave broke over the bows of the vessel, drenching them with spray. Brand led the way down-stairs.

"Since we are to be fellow-passengers," he said, "let us drink to our prosperous journey—and Theos."

Reist touched Ughtred's arm upon the stairs.

"He is to be trusted, this friend of yours?" he whispered, anxiously.

"Implicitly," Ughtred answered, with emphasis.

"Then we are very fortunate," Reist said, "for it is such a man as this whom we wanted."

CHAPTER IX

"MONSIEUR will pardon me!"

Ughtred glanced up, startled. For an hour or more he had been watching with fascinated eyes the great rolling pine forests through which the train was rushing. Brand and Reist were in the restaurant-car—Ughtred was rapidly becoming too excited to eat. They had entered upon the last stage of their journey. Somewhere away beyond that dim line of mountains was Theos. So far they had been neither accosted nor watched. This was the first stranger who had addressed a word to either of them.

"You wished for a seat here?" Ughtred asked.

The priest, who had come through from the dining-car, held between his fingers an unlit cigar. His fat, good-humoured face was a little flushed. He had the appearance of a man who has found his dinner a satisfactory meal.

"It is your *coupé*, I understand, monsieur," he answered, "but the smoking-car is full. I wondered if monsieur would permit me to occupy his friend's seat until he returns. One misses a smoke so much."

He looked longingly at the cigar. Ughtred rose and cleared off the rugs and papers which were spread over the vacant seats.

"My friends, I am sure, will have no objection," he declared. "I think that there is room for all of us."

The priest was volubly thankful. He lit his cigar and puffed at it with obvious pleasure.

"Monsieur is doubtless a great traveller," he remarked, urbanely. "For me a journey such as this is an event—a wonderful event. Not once in many years do I leave my people. Monsieur will be amused, but it is indeed ten years since I found myself in a railway train."

Ughtred was reserved, but the priest was quite willing to bear the brunt of the conversation so long as he had a listener. It appeared that he was on his way to visit his brother, who was a prosperous merchant in Belgrade. And monsieur?—if he were not too inquisitive—should he have the pleasure of his company all the way?

Ughtred hesitated for the fraction of a second. Reist was passing along the corridor with imperturbable face, but with his cap in his hand—an agreed upon sign of danger. So Ughtred, to whom a lie was as poison, braced himself for the effort.

"I go even farther than you," he declared. "My journey is not ended at Constantinople."

The priest's fat face was wrinkled into smiles. It was most fortunate—his own good fortune. For himself he was so unaccustomed to travel that he found it impossible to read. He was excited—besides, it gave him the headache. To converse only was possible. But after all he had no right to inflict himself thus upon monsieur. He had perhaps affairs to attend to—or he desired to sleep? Ughtred, who found it impossible to suspect this fat, simple-mannered man so shabbily

dressed, so wrapped in enjoyment of his bad cigar, smiled, and shook his head. They drifted into conversation. Ughtred learned the entire village history of Baineuill, and was made acquainted with the names and standing of each of its inhabitants from Jean the smith to Monsieur le Comte, who was an infidel, and whose house-parties were as orgies of the evil one.

"And monsieur," the priest asked, ingenuously, "monsieur is perhaps a soldier? I have talked so long of my own poor affairs. It must be tedious."

Just then Reist and Brand passed along the corridor, laughing heartily. Brand paused, and with a bow to the priest held out a paper to Ughtred.

"Read that, Brand!" he exclaimed. "These papers are the drollest in the world."

Ughtred looked up puzzled, but took the paper held out insistently towards him. At the bottom of an illustration were a few pencilled words.

"Be careful! Remember! You are W. B. The priest has been asking questions about us!"

Ughtred read, and smiled. The priest leaned forward.

"It is a joke, eh? Monsieur will permit me also? It is good to laugh."

Brand was equal to the occasion. He took the paper quickly away from Ughtred.

"Monsieur," he said, removing his cap, "the joke which I pointed out to my friend has, without doubt, humour, but the journal, as you see, is for the students. Monsieur will excuse me if I refrain from offering it to him."

The priest acquiesced with a graver face, and some show of dignity.

"But I fear, monsieur," he said to Brand, "that I am occupying your seat. You wish to return here, beyond a doubt?"

Brand shook his head.

"By no means, monsieur," he declared. "For the present, at any rate, I am engaged elsewhere."

They passed along the corridor. Glancing up at the priest, Ughtred was aware of a slight change in his expression. His brows were contracted, he was immersed in thought. The change was momentary, however. Soon he was again chattering away—still always of his own affairs. But there came a time when he wound up a little speech with a question.

"Is it not so, Monsieur Brand—was not that how your friend called you?"

Ughtred assented.

"My name is Walter Brand," he answered.

Again there came that faint change in the priest's face.

"Monsieur will not think me curious," he said. "He is perhaps a soldier?"

Ughtred shook his head.

"I have seen some fighting," he said, "but I am not a soldier. I am a journalist, if you know what that means—one who writes for the newspapers. My friend whom you saw speak to me just now is a soldier by profession."

The priest nodded pleasantly.

"And he, like yourself," he asked, "is he, too, English?"

Ughtred looked around, and lowered his voice.

"He has been in the English army, but he is not an Englishman. He has had a very unfortunate history. I wish that I could tell it to you, but the time is too short, and he does not like to be talked about."

The priest's face shone with sympathy.

"Poor fellow!" he murmured.

"Brand!"

They both looked up. Brand himself had entered the *coupé*. There was a slight frown upon his forehead, and his tone was curt.

"I wish you would explain to the conductor about our tickets," he said. "He is very stupid, and I cannot make him understand."

Ughtred rose at once and left the *coupé*. Brand bowed gravely to the priest.

"I trust monsieur will excuse me," he said, "for interrupting what I am sure must have been a very agreeable conversation."

The slight foreign accent was beautifully done. Brand was as tall as Ughtred, and although not so broad his carriage was good and his natural air one of distinction. The priest smiled benignly upon him.

"I fear," he said, "that I have already wearied your friend. My life must seem so humdrum to him, and to you, who have travelled so far and seen so much. For I, monsieur, as I have told your friend, have lived all my days in one quiet country place, and this journey is a great event for me."

Brand slipped into the vacant seat. In the vestibule Ughtred met Reist. He drew him into the smoking-

compartment. He was very pale, and his voice shook with emotion.

"The priest," he said, "is a creature of Domiloff's. You were on your guard?"

Ughtred nodded.

"What a famous fellow Brand is. Up to now, at any rate, his scheme has worked. He is personating me bravely, and really we are very much alike."

"He will be too clever for him," Reist said. "It is a matter of time. Do you know that in half-an-hour we shall be at the frontier?"

"So soon?" Ughtred exclaimed.

"Listen! I had a message from our friends at Limburg. The train will be searched at the barrier. There will be a determined attempt to prevent your entering the country. Theos is in a state of hopeless confusion. The motion to repeal your sentence of banishment is still before the House of Laws. The Custom officers, and I am afraid the Government officials, have been heavily bribed by Russia not to pass you across the frontier."

A bright light flashed in Ughtred's eyes.

"So we shall see," he muttered.

"They have a plan ready for us, no doubt," Reist continued, "and that priest is in it. Never mind. We shall outwit them. If only your friend Brand is equal to his part."

"The man is a born actor," Ughtred said. "I left him playing the Prince as I could never have done it. I do not think that Domiloff's man will find him out."

Reist pulled the window softly down and looked out. The train was passing across a high bridge. Below, the river wound its way through a stretch of rocky, broken country.

"We are barely twenty miles from my home—the castle of Reist is to the left of the hills there. In a few minutes the train will stop. Be ready to follow me, and do exactly as I do."

"But we are not timed to stop until we reach Gallona!"

"Never mind," Reist answered. "This will be a stop that does not appear upon the time-table. It is the plan of those who are working for us in Theos, and it is good. At the village station of Moschaum the signals will be against us, and we shall stop. Our task is to leave the train unseen—it may be difficult, but I have bribed all the servants, and they are preparing to see nothing. There will be horses waiting for us—and then—then it will be a gallop for a kingdom."

"The plan seems good enough," Ughtred said, thoughtfully, "and I am in your hands. But what about Brand?"

Reist shrugged his shoulders.

"He is one of those who love adventure, and I do not think that he can come to any harm. Let him play out his game. It was his own idea to personate you, and the risk is his own. Ah!"

There was a sudden slackening of speed. The brakes were on and the whistle sounding. Reist strolled to the platform of the car as though to look out, and Ughtred followed him. A conductor unfastened the gate and

slipped away. The train had come to a standstill in a tiny station, a little wooden building with a cupola, and everywhere surrounded with a dense forest of pines. Reist looked swiftly round.

"Now," he said. "Follow me."

They slipped from the train on the side remote from the platform, and in half-a-dozen strides had reached the impenetrable shelter of the trees. Then there was a whistle. The train crawled onward serpent-like with its flaring electric lights and the shower of sparks which flew upwards from the engine. An hour later Ughtred, riding in silence and at breakneck speed with Reist at his elbow crossed the frontier of his kingdom.

CHAPTER X

"PRINCE UGHTRED of Tyrnaus."

Brand awoke from a hideous nightmare, sat up on a rude horsehair couch, and held his head with both hands. He was conscious of a sense of nausea, burning temples, and a general indisposition to take any interest in his surroundings. He sank back upon his pillow.

"Oh, rot," he murmured. "Go away, please."

There was a short silence, then footsteps, and the newcomer bent over the sofa.

"Drink this."

The invitation was alluring. Brand's throat was like a limekiln. He sat up and took the proffered tumbler into his hands. The liquid was cold and sparkling—almost magical in its effects. He drained it to the last drop, and then looked curiously about him.

"Where the mischief am I?" he asked; "and who are you?"

The newcomer stood in the light from the window. He was a short and thick-set man, with iron-grey hair and black moustache slightly upturned. He had a pallid skin and keen grey eyes. His manner was at once grave and conciliatory.

"Your memory, Prince," he remarked, "is scarcely so good as mine. I have had the pleasure of seeing you but once before, yet I think that I should have recognized you anywhere."

"Oh, would you!" Brand remarked, beneath his breath.

"I will recall myself to your memory," the other continued, blandly. "My name is Domiloff!"

"Domiloff, of course," Brand echoed. "You are still ——"

"Still the representative of Russia to the State of Theos. It is true."

"And where am I?" Brand asked, looking around the bare, lofty room with some surprise; "and what am I here for?"

"You are in the House of Customs at Gallona. I met the train at the frontier to secure the honour of a little conversation with you before you proceeded to the capital. I found you exceedingly unwell, and took the liberty of bringing you here that you might have the opportunity of resting a little before completing your journey."

Brand rose slowly to his feet. He was still giddy, but rapidly recovering himself. His last distinct recollection was the coffee which he and the priest had ordered in their *coupé*. There was a peculiar taste—a swimming in his head—afterwards blank unconsciousness.

"You have been most considerate, I am sure," he said, slowly. "I am glad to have your explanation, otherwise my presence here, under the circumstances, might have suggested unpleasant things to me."

Domiloff's lips parted in an inscrutable smile. He remained silent.

"I might have remembered," Brand continued, "that I was travelling with two friends. What has become of them?"

Domiloff shrugged his shoulders.

"It was most unfortunate," he declared. "The train pulled up for a moment at a wayside station, and they appear to have descended—and to have been left behind."

Brand nodded.

"I might also have remembered," he continued, stroking his moustache thoughtfully, "a priest whose interest in his fellow-passengers was a little extraordinary—a cup of coffee pressed upon me, a queer taste—bah! Why waste time? I was drugged, sir, with your connivance, no doubt, and brought here. What is the meaning of it?"

Domiloff shrugged his shoulders.

"You assume too much, my dear Prince," he declared, blandly. "Let us not waste time by fruitless discussion. I will admit that I was particularly anxious to have a few minutes' quiet conversation with you before you entered the capital. The opportunity is here. Let us avail ourselves of it."

"Well?"

Domiloff coughed. He had expected a torrent of indignation and abuse. His guest's nonchalance was a little disquieting.

"You are entering," he said, "upon a troublesome inheritance."

"Well?"

"It is an inheritance," Domiloff continued, "which you can neither possess yourself of, nor hold, without powerful friends."

"Well?"

"My country is willing to be your friend."

"Your country," Brand remarked, quietly, "is renowned throughout the world for her generosity."

Domiloff bowed.

"You do us, sir," he said, "no more than justice."

Brand smiled.

"Well! Go on!"

"Theos is in a state of hopeless confusion," Domiloff remarked. "It is very doubtful whether the actual state of the country has been represented to you. The people are all clamouring for they know not what, law and order seem to be things of the past. South of the Balkans the Turks are massing; northwards, the mailed hand of Austria is slowly being extended."

"And Russia?" Brand asked. "It is not her custom to remain in the background."

"Russia," Domiloff said, "desires to be your friend. She will secure for you the throne, and she will guarantee your independence."

"At what price?"

Domiloff shrugged his shoulders.

"You are very suspicious, my dear Prince," he said. "My master does not sell his favours. He asks only for a reasonable recognition of your gratitude. I have here the copy of a treaty which will secure you against any foreign interference in the affairs of your kingdom. Its advantages to you and to Theos are so obvious that it is idle for me to waste time by enlarging upon them. Read it, my Prince."

"I shall be charmed," Brand exclaimed, stretching out his hand for it.

"You would doubtless prefer," Domiloff said, "to look it through alone. I will return in half-an-hour."

"You are very thoughtful," Brand answered. "By the bye, you will excuse my denseness, but I am not quite clear as to our exact relations at the present moment. I am, I presume, at Gallona?"

The Baron bowed.

"It is indisputable!"

"At an hotel?"

"You are," Domiloff declared, "my honoured guest."

"Is it part of your diplomacy to starve me?" Brand asked, coolly, "or may I have some breakfast?"

Domiloff touched the bell.

"My dear Prince!" he exclaimed, deprecatingly.

A servant entered with a tray—cold meats and a flask of wine. Outside the window a sentry walked up and down. Brand eyed him thoughtfully.

"I think that I should like a stroll," he remarked. "My head is still heavy."

Domiloff advanced, and laid his hand upon his shoulder.

"My dear Prince," he said, "I beg that for the present you will not think of it. It is of the utmost importance that your presence upon the soil of Theos should not be suspected. I have a special train waiting to take you to the capital. Until we start it will be far better, believe me, that you do not attempt to leave this room."

"At what hour do we start?" Brand asked.

Domiloff hesitated.

"It depends," he said, slowly, "upon circumstances."

Brand sat down and poured himself out a glass of wine.

"That means when I have signed the treaty, I suppose?"

Domiloff was already at the door. He affected not to hear.

"If your Highness will ring when you are prepared to give me an audience," he said, "I shall be entirely at your service."

* * * * * *

Brand ate and drank, threw himself into an easy-chair, and lit a cigarette. Presently he tried the handle of the door. It was locked. He moved to the window and looked out. Below was an old courtyard enclosed within high grey walls and iron gates, through which he could catch a glimpse of the town. The wide, open space, half square, half market-place, was crowded with people in strange costume, having baskets of fruit and vegetables, before which they squatted and called out their wares. Beyond were houses with vivid, whitewashed fronts, red roofs, and narrow windows. At the gates were stationed two soldiers in red tunics and broad white trousers, very baggy, and tucked into their boots. They were bareheaded, and they smoked long cigarettes, chattering meanwhile to one another and the people around in a dialect which to Brand was like a nightmare. He watched them for a while, and laughed softly to himself. This was an adventure after his own heart.

He looked at his watch. It was three o'clock.

"So Reist and the Prince were left behind," he murmured. "It was very well arranged. By now they should be on their way to the capital. I must make this last out as long as possible. What a coup!"

He lit another cigarette, and turned the treaty over in his hands. Here he met with a disappointment. There were two copies, one in Russian, the other in the Thetian language. He could not read either. After a few moments' deliberation he rang the bell.

Domiloff hurried in, expectantly.

"You are ready for me?" he asked. "You have read our proposals? You will perhaps now be disposed to admit the generosity of my master?"

Brand shrugged his shoulders.

"As yet," he said, coolly, "I am in a position to admit nothing. As a matter of fact, I cannot read this document. I cannot read Russian, and I have forgotten nearly all Thetian. You must have a copy made for me quickly either in French or English."

Domiloff started. A momentary shade of suspicion darkened his forehead.

"Forgotten your Thetian, Prince?" he exclaimed. "Your native tongue!"

"You forget that I have been an exile from Theos ever since I was a child," Brand answered. "I can understand a word or so here and there, but that is not sufficient. It is necessary that I should have an exact and precise comprehension of your proposals."

Domiloff took up the document.

"I will make a copy myself," he said. "It will not take long. I hope that you will soon find your recol-

lection of the language revive, Prince. You will find the people sensitive about it."

Domiloff seated himself at the table, and for some time there was silence in the room except for the scratching of his pen. Brand lounged in the easy-chair—amused himself by speculating as to the end of his adventure. Presently there was a sharp tap at the door. A messenger entered, and conversed for awhile with Domiloff in Russian. He was dismissed with a few rapid orders. Domiloff turned round in his chair and faced Brand.

"Prince Ughtred," he said, "I have disturbing news from the capital. The disorder in the city is so great that the Powers must intervene at once unless some decisive step be taken. I have finished my translation. Sign it and you shall enter into your kingdom before sunset."

Brand smiled.

"I will give you my answer," he said, "in ten minutes."

Domiloff bowed.

"I shall await your decision, Prince," he said. "Only remember this. To-night there must be a King of Theos or a Protectorate."

CHAPTER XI

THE ten minutes became half-an-hour. Domiloff at last lost patience and knocked at the door. Brand, who had just finished a shorthand copy of the treaty, and had tucked it within the inner sole of his boot, realized the fact that he had reached the end of his tether.

"Come in," he called out cheerfully.

Domiloff entered and closed the door behind him.

"I cannot understand your Highness's indecision," he said, impatiently. "The document which I have had the honour to submit for your approval is one of the most simple and straightforward which was ever written. And while you hesitate, Prince, your kingdom passes away. Every moment affairs in the capital draw nearer to a crisis."

Brand leaned back in his chair. He looked no longer at the manuscript. It was evident that his decision was taken.

"It seems to me," he said, quietly, "that my kingdom passes away none the less surely when I sign this paper. Your terms, Baron Domiloff, amount to a Russian Protectorate. Our trade is to be yours, and yours only. Russian is to be taught in our schools, and Russians are to control our army and our customs. What will Theos gain in return for this?"

"Her independence will be guaranteed. Russia will be her faithful friend!"

"Her independence!" Brand smiled. "Her independence will be rather a tattered garment."

Domiloff shrugged his shoulders.

"Prince," he said, "you scarcely yet know the nature of your inheritance. Theos is a small, weak State, hemmed in with powerful nations. One of the Powers must needs to be her protector. Russia, ever generous, offers herself. Without her aid you could not hold your kingdom for an hour."

Brand sighed.

"Well," he said, slowly, "supposing I agree—will you tell me this? How can I sign a treaty before I am King?"

Domiloff touched the paper with his forefinger.

"That has been provided for," he said. "What you will sign is a promise to ratify the treaty on your accession to the throne."

Brand shook his head.

"As a private individual," he said, "my signature is worth nothing. Further, I decline to sign a paper which might at any future time be brought up against me, and cost me the respect and allegiance of my people."

Domiloff looked anxious. A moment ago the affair had seemed settled.

"What do you propose, then?" he asked.

"I will swear upon my honour," Brand said, "and before witnesses if you desire it, that I will sign the treaty whenever you require it after my accession to the throne."

Domiloff hesitated, made up his mind to yield, and yielded gracefully.

"It is sufficient," he declared. "The honour of the House of Tyrnaus has never been questioned. But there is one more promise which I must ask you to add. The Governor of the Customs, in whose house we now are, has acted as a patriot and a wise man in conjunction with me."

"I understand," Brand said, with a quiet smile. "He shall be held harmless, so far as I am concerned."

Domiloff vanished for a moment, and reappeared followed by a soldierly-looking young man in dark blue uniform of decidedly Russian appearance, and an olive-skinned, black-bearded civilian, with shifty eyes and nervous manner. They both bowed low before Brand, who drew himself up to his full height and eyed them scornfully.

"These are your witnesses, Baron?" he asked Domiloff.

Domiloff assented.

"Captain Barka," he said, "who is in command of the barracks here, is one of the most gallant and faithful officers in the army of Theos. Mr. Omardine is Governor of the Customs, and a civic magistrate."

Brand regarded them coldly.

"You are here," he said, "to listen to these words of mine. On the sacred honour of the House of Tyrnaus, and before the God of Theos, I swear that whenever I may be asked after my accession to the throne of this country, I will sign the treaty which I hold now in my right hand. And further, I swear not to divest of his office or punish in any way for their treachery, Captain Barka or Mr. Omardine, your two witnesses."

The two men started. Omardine turned pale and glanced at Domiloff with furtive eyes. Barka laid his hand for a moment upon the hilt of his sword, and the deep colour dyed his cheeks. Domiloff stepped hastily forward.

"It is sufficient, your Highness," he said; "but I must protest against the word 'treachery' being used as applying to either of these gentlemen. They have simply studied the best interests of their country in recognizing that her destiny is identical with that of Russia."

Brand turned his back upon them.

"So far as their safety is concerned," he said, "I have passed my word. My opinions are my own. Will you tell me, Baron, at what time you propose to release me?"

"If your Highness will accept my escort," Domiloff said, "I propose to leave for the capital at once."

"The sooner the better," Brand declared.

"Then there remains only for your Highness to put on the uniform which I have sent for," Domiloff remarked, touching the bell.

"What uniform?" asked Brand, quickly.

"The uniform of a Colonel in the Guards of Theos," Domiloff answered. "Here it is."

A servant entered, carrying a suit of gorgeous light blue and white uniform. Barka and Omardine respectfully withdrew.

"I see no need at all for me to wear these things," Brand exclaimed, glancing in bewilderment at the many trappings and strange fastenings. "I will go as I am.

There will be plenty of time afterwards for this sort of thing."

"It is impossible," Domiloff interrupted. "Your Highness seems to forget that your throne has yet to be won. The people have had enough of civilians. You must appear before them as a soldier, and they will shout you King till their throats are hoarse and the water stands in their eyes. They are a dramatic people, lovers of effect. They must be taken by storm. I cannot offer your Highness a valet, but perhaps I can be of assistance."

Brand yielded, but not without secret misgivings. With his clothes a certain part of his easy confidence departed. His share in the game was no longer to be a purely passive one. With the donning of this uniform to which he had no manner of claim he entered the lists of intrigues boldly, as an impostor and masquerader. Under certain circumstances the way out might be difficult.

Domiloff watched him make his toilet with a certain curiosity. It was odd that a military man should be so much embarrassed by buckles and straps, yet when all was completed he was bound to admit that the result was satisfactory enough. Brand was a good-looking fellow, and he looked the part.

"Your Highness will be so good now as to follow me," Domiloff directed. "A carriage is waiting to take us to the station."

A guard of honour surrounded the open landau, whose military salute Brand gravely returned. The news of his arrival had quickly spread. The country

people thronged around, shouting and cheering. The air was rent with strange, barbaric cries. Their short drive to the railway station was a triumphal progress. Brand alone was wholly uncomfortable. Surely amongst all this press of people there would be some one to whom Prince Ughtred was known. They reached the station, however, without incident, and amidst ever-increasing enthusiasm. A handsome saloon was drawn up to the carpeted platform, and a cordon of soldiers kept the station clear. In less than five minutes they were off.

Brand unbuckled his sword, and threw his helmet up in the rack. Then he made himself comfortable in an easy-chair, ostensibly to sleep, in reality to think out the situation.

"How long will it take us to reach the capital?" he asked.

"Two hours," Domiloff answered. "Sleep for a time if you like. You may make yourself quite easy. My arrangements for your reception are complete. You will receive a tremendous ovation. The news of your coming has electrified the city."

Brand's gratification at the prospect was certainly not apparent. However, he closed his eyes, and relapsed into thought. Two hours! He reckoned it all out. His knowledge of the geography of the country was slight, but it seemed to him impossible that Prince Ughtred and Reist could yet have reached the capital. So far all that he had done had been good. The difficulty which confronted him now was to select the proper moment for his avowal, and, having made it, to escape. He foresaw difficulties. Domiloff was not a man to be

made a fool of lightly. His one comforting reflection was that when the explosion did come he would be safer in Theos than in a frontier town which was obviously under Russian influence.

Slowly the train wound its way across a rocky and difficult country, a country of mountains, woods, and rivers, valleys rich with corn-tracts, tiny villages whose gleaming white homesteads made picturesque many a hillside. Brand sat quite still with half-closed eyes. Presently the door of the saloon opened, and closed again softly. Domiloff looked in and withdrew. Then there came the sound of voices from the next compartment. Listening intently, Bland caught a word or two here and there.

"Absolutely impossible. . . . I saw him in Paris after the Algerian campaign . . . thinner, that is all. . . . Reist and the English journalist were simply left . . . *planté là*. Hernoff planned everything."

"Mistakes. . . . He does not make mistakes. If I believed it I would shoot him like a dog. You have your revolver, too. Good! Oh, yes, he will sign! It will be a record reign. It may last a month. They will see that he is under the thumb of Russia. No, he is fast asleep. After Hernoff's medicine one is sleepy for days."

The voices died away. They passed through a little wayside station gay with flags, and the train began to descend a series of gradients. Below was a great fruitful plain, bounded southwards by a range of towering mountains. Far away westwards was a huge ascent

to a wide-spreading table-land. Brand sat with his eyes fixed steadily upon it, and a queer little smile upon his lips. He was sufficiently aware of his surroundings to know that there was the fortress capital of Theos.

He heard footsteps, and closed his eyes again. Domiloff entered the saloon, and shook him by the arm. He awoke with a drowsy murmur.

"Wake up, your Highness! We are within a few miles of the capital."

Brand sat up.

"All right," he said. "I am ready. But how my head aches."

Domiloff smiled grimly, and thrust a sheet of paper into his hand.

"It will pass off," he said. "See, this is your speech. Learn it. It will not be wise for you to address the people in any save their own language."

Brand took the sheet of unintelligible characters into his own hand. He looked blankly at it.

"Read it to me," he said. "Let me hear how it sounds."

Domiloff declaimed and translated it. Brand listened thoughtfully. Apparently the return of Ughtred of Tyrnaus to the throne of his forefathers was solely owing to a benevolent desire on the part of Russia to bring to Theos an era of unparalleled peace and prosperity. Far away a gleam of white and grey towers flashed upon the hillside. Villages became more plentiful. They were nearing the capital.

CHAPTER XII

Once more the men and women of Theos thronged the streets of their time-worn capital. A thousand torches flared in the open space before the palace. Lanterns and flags waved from all the principal houses and public buildings. Only the great Reist mansion was silent and gloomy, and many questioning eyes were turned towards it.

"It was the Duke himself who has brought Ughtred of Tyrnaus here," muttered one. "Yet his house is dark and empty, and no man has seen him."

"There is something strange about it," said another, "and I like not the wolf Domiloff at the shoulder of a Tyrnaus."

"Please God, the son may not be like the father!"

"Let us see him," cried another. "Come—shout!"

So the air shook with the roar of voices, and servants in the blue Tyrnaus livery came out upon the balcony of the brilliantly-lit palace and spread a carpet. But the man whom they longed to see lingered.

Domiloff argued with him in vain. He was unaccountably obstinate.

"It is the Duke of Reist who should stand by my side when first I speak to my people," he declared, coolly. "It is he who brought me from England, not you. He must be my sponsor. If he is not here I will wait."

Domiloff was naturally furious. He had been at con-

siderable pains to insure the absence of Reist from the capital on this occasion, and his inopportune return would amount to a disaster. On the other hand, the populace were fast working themselves up into a state of frenzy. Let this man show himself, and the success of his coup was assured. It was unpardonable hesitation. He trembled with rage. In the King's palace, in his own chamber, he had lost for the moment his hold upon this man. It was the one weak spot in his carefully thought-out scheme. It was the one contingency against which he was comparatively helpless.

"You are losing a golden opportunity, Prince," he declared. "Your hesitation is a crime. The people are on fire to see you. They will shout you King with one voice. Give to Reist all the glory if you will, but, if you would win your kingdom, out on to the balcony and show yourself. Hear them!"

The roar of voices sounded like thunder from the street below. Brand smoked on stolidly.

"I shall wait one hour for the Duke of Reist," he decided. "At the end of that time, if he has not arrived, I will reconsider the matter."

Domiloff, who did not expect the Duke of Reist in an hour, was forced to acquiesce.

"I will send messengers out amongst the people," he said. "I will let them know that you are worn out with travelling, but that in an hour you will address them. Shall it be so?"

"You can do as you like," Brand answered, quietly. "I make no promises."

Domiloff withdrew, furious. Brand was left alone.

He was a journalist of the modern type, and he had been in a good many tight corners. His nerves were of iron, his courage indomitable, and his sense of humour prodigious. But this was getting beyond a joke. He was in a *cul-de-sac*. Escape was scarcely to be hoped for, disclosure would certainly cost him his life. Nevertheless, as the roar of voices mounted again to his ears the corners of his mouth twitched and his eyes shone with laughter. He found himself longing for pen and paper, wondering how much of this he dare use as copy. Then the clock struck. He became instantly grave. After all, an hour was a short time. He concentrated his thoughts once more upon the situation.

On one point he was resolved. He would not carry his personation any further. He would not present himself to the people of Theos as an impostor, with Domiloff for his introducer, and unable to frame a single sentence in the language of his supposed forefathers. The speech which Domiloff had written out for him was, of course, an impossibility. Some time to-night the Prince and Reist must surely arrive, and the situation then might become possible. Failing that, he could see nothing but chaos.

Half-an-hour had passed, but he was not greatly disturbed. He had a touch of that beautiful faith which is the heritage of the born adventurer. He was content to wait for something to turn up. He threw away the end of his cigar and walked slowly up and down the great vaulted room. The ceiling was of extraordinary height, and the wooden panels which covered the walls were black with age and beautifully carved. He paused be-

fore one of them to examine the design, and passed his fingers lightly over the figure of a priest who knelt by the side of a wounded man in armour. It was a rugged but wonderful representation. Suddenly he started back as though he had been shot. The priest was being split down the middle before his eyes.

He stood rigid. Even his nerves were scarcely proof against this sort of thing. The head of the wounded knight had parted from his body, and the legs of the priest were every moment drawing further apart. He approached the panel gingerly. It was not fancy. There was a long, thin crack from the floor to the tapestry border, which stood about six feet high. Whilst he watched, it widened. He slipped his hand into his pocket and drew out his revolver.

From one inch to two—to half a foot, and then wide open, the panel slid back. Brand uttered a soft cry of amazement. A woman, dark, slender, and beautiful, stood upon the threshold of what seemed to be a passage, herself almost as motionless as a painted figure. Her eyes met his with a challenging light, her pose was imperious. Diamonds flashed from her neck and bosom, and her hair was coiled upon her head coronet-like, after the manner of the women of Theos. Her black gown was cut in a manner unknown to western dressmakers —to Brand she seemed like a wonderful Italian picture of the middle ages stepped bodily from its frame. He lowered his revolver, and took a quick step backward. Then to his surprise, she spoke to him in English, haltingly, but with perfect distinctness.

"Lock the door."

The sound of his native language made a new man of Brand. His senses were no longer dazed.

"It is—already locked," he answered.

She took a step forward, and before he could divine her purpose sank gently on one knee in a wonderful courtesy. He took the slim white hand, and bowed low over it.

"You are Ughtred of Tyrnaus?" she said, eagerly. "Is it not so?"

He laughed quietly.

"It is the first time," he said, "that I have been asked the question. Personation seems to come natural to me."

She looked at him intently, and the fine, dark eyebrows were drawn a little closer together.

"I am not very quick at speaking English," she said. "You are Ughtred of Tyrnaus?"

"Well, I am supposed to be," he admitted.

"Then where is my brother?" she demanded. "Why is he not with you?"

He looked at her, puzzled.

"Forgive me," he said. "I am rather stupid. What is your brother's name, and who are you?"

Her eyes gleamed with suspicion. Was it not obvious who she was?

"I am the Countess Marie of Reist," she said. "Will you answer me quickly?"

He divined the likeness at once.

"And do you live—in the wall?" he asked.

She frowned imperiously.

"If you indeed are Ughtred of Tyrnaus," she said,

"you should know that the Reist house adjoins the palace, and that this passage has been in existence since the days of King Rudolph. Tell me what you have done with my brother Nicholas, and how it happens that you have entered the city without him, and in company with Domiloff the wolf."

He smiled. His optimism was justified. Something had turned up.

"You must allow me to make a confession, Countess," he said, easily. "I am not Ughtred of Tyrnaus. The Prince is on his way to the city with your brother, and, to tell you the truth, if they do not arrive here very soon my position will become extremely uncomfortable."

She withdrew within the shelter of the panel and regarded him haughtily.

"You say that you are not Ughtred of Tyrnaus," she exclaimed. "Then who are you? An impostor! Yes! You are in the royal chamber, and even now the people call for you. You are a tool of Domiloff's. Good! The people shall know that they are being deceived!"

He was only just in time to seize her by the wrist. She wrenched herself free with a furious little cry, but he blocked her escape.

"Countess," he said, with perfect respect, but with a gleam of laughter in his eyes, "pray do not desert me, for I am a friend of your brother's, and especially of Prince Ughtred's. I am not masquerading for the fun of the thing, I can assure you, but solely to outwit Domiloff. Permit me to explain. The fact is, I need your help."

She eyed him coldly. The touch of his fingers seemed burning still upon her wrist.

"Well?"

"Three of us left England together," Brand said. "Your brother, Prince Ughtred, and myself—Walter Brand, a newspaper writer and a person of no importance. I won't stop to tell you how I became one of the party. It isn't of any consequence, and time is. I happen to slightly resemble Prince Ughtred, and we got scent of a plot to stop our entrance into Theos. Well, Prince Ughtred and I exchanged identities. The consequences were these. The Prince and your brother left the train secretly before we left the frontier, I was drugged, and awoke to find myself *tête-à-tête* with a remarkably gentlemanly personage called Domiloff."

Her eyes flashed fire. She came a little further into the room.

"Ah! Well!"

"He took me for granted in the kindest possible manner—waived aside the matter of my abduction—affected to consider me as an afternoon caller. He introduced politics in a casual sort of way. Russia I found was the great and generous friend of Theos. Russia was pining for the friendship of Theos."

She interrupted him with a fierce little gesture of contempt.

"The hound! Russia is our enemy! It was she who sought to buy our freedom from Metzger, the merchant, for a million pounds."

He nodded.

"Exactly. However, I had to listen to him. In the

end he produced a treaty—Russian protection for Theos in exchange for every shred of independence she possessed. If I would swear before witnesses to sign it when I became King, I might proceed, and Domiloff himself would be my escort. If I refused—well, I think then that other things were in store for me. After a becoming show of hesitation I promised to sign—when I was King. Then Domiloff hustled me along here. I have delayed things as long as possible, but it's getting a little uncomfortable. Domiloff can't understand why I won't go and speak to the people. If I declare myself, he will shoot me on sight. What I have been praying for is a chance to escape, or that your brother and the Prince might turn up."

She regarded him with unfeigned admiration.

"I did you an injustice," she said. "I see that you are a very brave man, and we in Theos love brave men."

He bowed before her so gallantly and looked into her eyes so closely that a wave of colour flushed in her cheeks. A distant sound in the Palace, however, brought them to a swift sense of the danger which threatened him.

"You see," he explained, "I was bound to keep it up as long as I could, or Domiloff would have tried to prevent your brother and the Prince from reaching the capital. Besides, since I have read the proposed treaty they would never allow me to escape alive."

She nodded slowly.

"Yes, that is so. It would not be well that you speak first to the people with Domiloff at your elbow, but if it comes to a matter of life or death you must do it. I

will send servants and horses to hasten my brother's coming, and you must continue the personation."

"There is an objection," he replied, quickly. "I do not know a single word of your language, and to speak for the first time to the people in any other would do the Prince a great injury with them."

She reflected for a moment. Then her face lit up. She pointed down the passage.

"I think," she said, "that it would be a very good time for Prince Ughtred to disappear. You shall come with me."

Brand hesitated.

"But, Countess," he protested, "they will search your house. You will be accused of harbouring an impostor."

She dismissed the idea with a gesture of superb contempt.

"The Reist House," she assured him, "is secure against Domiloff or any of his creatures. I offer you its shelter, sir. I beg you to come with me."

Still he hesitated. A fresh murmur arose from the swelling crowd without—footsteps were heard in the corridor—the hour struck. She laid her fingers upon his arm, and looked upward into his face.

"Sir," she said, softly, "I beg that you will come with me."

Brand felt his heart beating with more than the mere excitement of the moment. He yielded. She pressed a spring with her finger, and the panel rolled slowly back into its place.

CHAPTER XIII

Up the steep ascent to the capital two men galloped their tired horses in stern silence. For twelve hours they had ridden with scant waste of breath in speech. Only at each change, and seven times since break of day, had they changed horses. Prince Ughtred had lit a fresh cigar and asked the same question and met with the same reply.

"How goes it, Nicholas?"

"We keep up with the time. Forward!"

As they neared the capital they rode through a stream of people wending their way citywards. Reist drew rein.

"Whither away, friends?"

"To the capital, sir. Prince Ughtred of Tyrnaus, our future King, is there. We go to greet him."

The two men exchanged quick glances as they rode on.

"I do not understand it," Reist admitted. "Our coming is unannounced. A certain amount of secrecy was necessary. Something strange seems to have happened."

By degrees their progress along the narrow road grew more and more difficult. The country folk thronged the thoroughfare, gay in picturesque holiday attire, many of them singing a strange national air which stirred in Ughtred's heart some faint echo of far-away recollec-

tions. He watched them eagerly, and his heart swelled with pride. A fine, stalwart race, with the free swinging walk of mountaineers, bright-eyed, clear-skinned, with cheeks as brown as berries. His dormant patriotism, already awakened by his long ride through the beautiful, dimly-familiar country, beat in his heart. He would rule these people as his children, and though he died sword in hand the yoke of the conqueror should never bow their shoulders. It was a great task—a great heritage.

A train, brilliant with lights, glided serpent-like over the high viaduct to their left. A murmur arose from amongst the people.

"The Prince," they cried. "The Prince."

"What does it mean?" Ughtred asked.

"God only knows," Reist answered, bewildered.

At the station a cordon of soldiers blocked the way. The two men spurred on into the front ranks. Amongst a thunder of acclamation they saw Domiloff and Brand in his brilliant uniform take their places in the waiting carriage. They were speechless.

"To the palace," Reist cried at last. "Come, Ughtred; there's some damned underhand plotting going on."

"It was Brand!" Ughtred exclaimed. "Brand in the uniform of the Theos Guards. Is the man mad?"

"I do not think that it was Brand at all," Reist answered, fiercely. "It is a plot of that accursed Russian. Way, good people, way!"

But the people, good-natured though they were, were wedged too thickly to let them pass. At last in a rush

they were almost unhorsed. A direct progress to the palace was impossible. Reist turned up a side street.

"We will go to my house," he said. "It will take us some time this way, but we shall never succeed in reaching the palace."

* * * * * *

The panel slid back behind them, and closed with a spring. From some place upon the wall invisible to him the Countess took a small silver lamp, and carefully lit it. Then holding it high over her head she turned towards Brand.

"You must follow me closely," she said. "The way is narrow, and there are steps. Listen!"

They both stood for a moment with bated breath. In the room behind was tumult. There were angry voices, the ringing of bells, bewildered exclamations.

"It is my friend, Domiloff," Brand whispered. "I am afraid that he has lost his temper. I might at least have left a note."

She motioned him to follow her.

"You are quite safe," she declared. "The secret passage has not been used for many years. It is unknown to any within the palace. I do not know what made me think of it to-night."

"It was," Brand remarked, "a remarkable piece of good fortune for me. I do not fancy that our friend Domiloff in a passion would be at all a pleasant companion."

Her face hardened.

"Domiloff," she said, "is a traitor and a ruffian. When I saw you alone with him and without Nicholas

I knew that something must have happened. My brother would never have suffered him to have stood by your side to-night. This way."

They stepped into a large dimly-lit room, with high panelled walls and a vaulted roof. The door rolled back behind them. The girl passed her hands along the wall till even the crack was invisible. Then she moved to the table and struck a gong.

"You must need wine," she said. "Basil!"

A grey-haired old servant entered the room, and at the sight of Brand would have fallen upon one knee, but the girl stopped him.

"Basil, this is not Prince Ughtred," she said, "but a friend of his and ours who has been taking the Prince's place in order that Domiloff might be deceived. Bring us some wine."

Brand drank from the long Venetian glass, and afterwards sank gratefully into the high-backed chair to which she motioned him. At her request he told her everything which had happened since the coming of Reist to London. And from below there came to them often the murmur of the waiting crowds.

She was superbly devoid of nerves. She had no manner of apprehension.

"They will come," she said, "and the people will wait. Tell me some more of your wonderful London."

"You have never been there?" he exclaimed in astonishment.

She shook her head.

"No, nor in Paris even. No further west than Vienna."

"It is incredible," he murmured.

"And why incredible?" she asked him, with delicately upraised eyebrows. "I do not understand. Theos is my home—those places are nothing to me. Whilst I was in Vienna I was miserable. All was hurry and bustle. There was so little dignity, so little repose. I do not think that people who live in such places can understand what it is to love one's homeland. Everywhere, too, even amongst the aristocracy, one met vulgar people. Shopkeepers and merchants who had made very much money mixed freely with the nobles. They tell me that in England it is also like this. In Theos I think that we are wiser."

She spoke simply—as one who points out a grievous impropriety. Brand smiled.

"I have heard your country spoken of as one of the most aristocratic in the world," he remarked. "I think that it must be true."

"From what I have seen," she answered, "it may be so. There are very little of the old nobility left in Theos, but we are content to let them die out rather than to raise to their ranks those who have enriched themselves with commerce. We believe that our way is best."

"And you yourself?" he asked. "Tell me how you occupy yourself. You have friends—amusements?"

She shrugged her shoulders ever so slightly.

"My brother has large estates," she said, "and with them come many duties. I see that our peasant women are properly brought up, and that they retain their skill in lace work. Then there is music, and when we are at Castle Reist we hunt. It is true that I have not many

friends of my own order, but that is scarcely to be expected. The care of so many of those who are dependent upon one is a very absorbing duty. We give a dowry to every girl who marries suitably amongst our own people. For many generations this has been a religion with us. Tell me, then, is it not so with the maidens of your country?—I speak, of course, of those who are of noble birth."

He shook his head.

"I think not," he answered. "You see, for them there are many diversions. They play games, hunt, shoot, and ride with their brothers and their brothers' friends when they are at their estates. Then for half the year they live in London, and every night there are dances, concerts, theatres, and parties of all sorts."

She nodded gravely.

"That is what I have heard," she said. "They take life so much more lightly than we who live in quieter places. Here there is born with us the consciousness that our rank has many obligations. There is not a peasant girl on my estates whom I do not know by name. It has been so with the women of our house for many generations."

There was a short silence. Then she raised her eyes to his.

"Your own sisters?" she asked. "Are they, too, such as you describe?"

Brand smiled faintly.

"I have only one sister," he said, "and she is married. But my own people would scarcely count—from your point of view."

She looked at him, faintly puzzled.

"You mean," she asked, "that you are not of noble birth?"

He shook his head.

"By no means! My father was a physician, and I myself write for the newspapers!"

"But you spoke of Prince Ughtred," she remarked, "as your friend."

He smiled.

"In England," he explained, "all these things are regarded very differently. We are a very democratic nation, and Prince Ughtred, you must remember, is half an Englishman."

She was silent. He had an absurd fancy that she was disappointed—that her momentary interest in him was gone. He was angry with himself for the idea, angry with himself also for the effort which his little speech had cost him. In England he counted himself a Radical, almost a Socialist, and would have laughed to scorn the idea that the slightest possible barrier could exist between men and women of unequal birth. But out here, in the presence of this girl who spoke her mind so simply, yet with such absolute conviction, he seemed to have come into touch with a new order! The aristocracy which was to her as a creed was a real and a live thing! He almost justified her in his mind. What was surely a fallacy in England might be truth here.

The silence was prolonged. Then he glanced up to find her watching him with a slight smile curving her lips.

"To you," she said, "I must seem very old-fash-

ioned. Oh, yes, I can understand your point of view. If I have not travelled I have at least read, and your English books make these things clear enough. But here we are surrounded with the old customs. It is not possible to escape from them. We are almost mediæval."

"I am looking forward to studying your country closely," he said. "What I have seen of it has charmed me. So far I have come across but one thing which I would gladly change."

"And that?" she asked.

"Is the uniform of the Thetian Guards," he answered, turning slightly in his chair. "I must confess that my body was never made for such gorgeousness."

She laughed and struck the gong.

"Basil will show you to my brother's room," she said. "Wear any of his clothes you choose."

He rose with alacrity.

"You will be safe—alone?" he asked, with a doubtful glance towards the door.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Domiloff has courage, I believe, of a sort," she answered, "but not enough to bring him uninvited across the threshold of this house in my brother's absence."

He followed the servant from the room, and was shown into a bedchamber of huge proportions. He changed his clothes as quickly as possible for those which were tendered to him, and returned to the room where he had left the Countess. She welcomed him with a smile which she tried in vain to suppress.

"You must forgive me," she said, as their eyes met. "Indeed, it is hard to avoid a smile. My brother is of slight stature, and you are very tall,—is it not so?"

"Oh, I don't mind," he answered, good-humouredly, conscious that his trousers terminated at the ankle, and that the seams of his unbuttoned coat were bursting. "I should be comfortable in anything since I have got rid of that sword and the other thing like a satchel which kept tripping me up. The management of a woman's train has always seemed to me an accomplishment, but it is nothing compared with the difficulty of walking like a soldier with those things whacking at your ankles every few moments. One thing I can promise you and myself, Countess. If Domiloff and the whole lot of them catch me nothing would induce me to put on that uniform again."

"It was very becoming," she said, smilingly.

"You are making fun of me," he declared, reproachfully.

"Indeed I meant it," she assured him. "I never doubted but that you were Ughtred of Tyrnaus!"

He felt absurdly pleased. There was a note of regret too in her tone. Then, as though with some effort she addressed him more formally.

"You need have no fear," she said, "that Domiloff will find you here. Neither he nor any of his creatures dare force their way into this house. All that we must pray for now is the speedy coming of Nicholas and the Prince."

Almost as she spoke they heard quick footsteps upon the corridor outside. The door was thrown open.

CHAPTER XIV

NICHOLAS of Reist, closely followed by Prince Ughtred, strode into the room. Marie uttered a little cry of joy—Brand drew a long sigh of relief.

"Nicholas, at last!" she cried.

He seized her hands and drew her to him. Then he turned to Ughtred.

"You will not recognize your old playmate, Prince," he said. "Marie, this is Prince Ughtred of Tyrnaus."

He bowed low before her, and she murmured a few words of greeting. Then both Nicholas of Reist and Ughtred saw Brand standing underneath the great chimneypiece.

"Brand!" the former cried. "Brand! How in God's name did you find your way here?"

Brand smiled enigmatically.

"Listen," he said, "and I will tell you."

They stood grouped around him. He told his story tersely yet fully. When he had finished there was a moment's breathless silence. He pointed to the door.

"You have not a moment to lose," he exclaimed. "The people are bewildered now, soon they will become impatient. The uniform is in the room where I changed. Let Prince Ughtred put it on and speak to the people from your balcony. It will turn Domiloff's hair grey, but he is powerless. Listen!"

Once more brother and sister exchanged quick

glances. Once more the men of Theos, as with one throat, shouted for Nicholas of Reist. Marie looked curiously towards the Prince. He was handsomer than Brand, broader and of finer presence. Yet her eyes narrowed with something which was akin to hate. In her heart she believed that her brother was making a great mistake. It was a Reist this people wanted, not one of his corrupt race.

"Brand is right!" Reist decided. "Prince, my servants will show you to my room and assist you. I will speak a few words to the people and prepare them for your coming."

From topmost storey to basement the Reist house flashed out in sudden light. The people, who were weary of shouting in front of the palace, marked the change, and a sudden rush took place. It was Reist who stood there with his hands resting lightly upon the balustrade. A roar of welcome greeted him. Now at last this mystery would be cleared up. Then there followed a silence so intense, so breathless, that the very air seemed charged with the tension of it. Reist's voice rang out like a still, clear note, perfectly audible to all.

"My country people," he said, "not many days ago you charged me with a mission. To-night I acquit myself of it. I bring you good news. The illustrious soldier who has won fame fighting another country's battles has never for one moment forgotten his name or his native land, has never forgotten his descent from that great race of Tyrnaus who, generations ago, made your country one to be feared and respected throughout Europe. He is willing to come to our aid in these evil

times. He is a brave man and a just. He will rule you as a soldier King! May the God of our ancestors bless his reign, and preserve for everlasting the independence of Theos and the freedom of our sons!"

As the last word had left Reist's lips Ughtred of Tyrnaus in all the bravery of his brilliant uniform passed through the great room. Marie, who had been watching for him, shrank back at his near approach in something like awe. For indeed it seemed as though Rudolph the Great, whose picture frowned down upon them from the wainscotted wall, walked once more in their midst. The unwonted excitement had given fire to his features, seemed indeed to have added inches to his great stature. No wonder that the people who saw him come raised their voices in a great shout of welcome.

"A Tyrnaus! A Tyrnaus! God save the King!"

The band struck up the National Anthem, and from the throats of thousands came that strange, thrilling air, the song of their liberty. Prince Ughtred listened with tears in his eyes—and in the palace Domiloff held his head and walked backwards and forwards in speechless bewilderment. The last bars died away. Then Ughtred spoke to his people, and these are some of the things which he said.

"Men of Theos, that song which you have sung has followed me into many strange countries. I have ridden into battles with it in my ears, I have heard it amongst the roaring of the guns and in the silent watches of the night. To me it has always sounded like very sweet music, for it has recalled to me ever my native land. . . . I, too, you must remember, am a son of

Theos. For long I have been an exile, but no other country has ever seemed like home to me. Always I have hoped that some day my lot might bring me back to the homeland amongst the mountains so inexpressibly dear to all of us. . . . I, too, though far away, have followed ever the fortunes of Theos. I have read of her sufferings and her misfortunes. I have blushed with shame to read of those, who, calling themselves her sons, would have bartered away her liberty for gold. . . . And now you have done away with this hateful Republic. The House of Laws is once more convoked. The Duke of Reisc has sought me out and brought from you a wonderful message. Well, I know little of kingcraft, but I may at least call myself a soldier. If the House of Laws will ratify your choice, nothing in this world could make me happier than to throw in my lot with yours, to devote my life to preserving for you and Theos that ancient and God-given heritage—our freedom! This little State is surrounded, it is true, by powerful enemies. Yet God is not always with the strong. Let us be fearless, just, and slow to give offence. Then, if we are attacked, it must be war to the bitter end. We can at least live like men and die heroes. My people, if it comes to pass that I am chosen to be your King, I can promise you this. While I live, and whilst a single one of you will stand by my side, we will remain a free and independent nation. We will hand to our children their birthright untarnished and entire. This is my word to you, and if ever I fail to keep it may I forfeit my place through all eternity by the side of my forefathers who gave their lives for Theos."

The air was rent with frantic cheering. These were the words and this the man to win their hearts. So throughout the crowd swept a passionate and overwhelming wave of enthusiasm. Domiloff heard it and swore unutterable things under his breath. Reist, for all that this was his doing, felt a certain momentary anger with this people who had taken a stranger so swiftly into their heart. Marie said nothing, but her dark eyes were eloquent. Ughtred stepped back at last into the room with a glow upon his face which for a moment transformed it.

"You are an orator, my friend," Reist said, quietly. "You have won your throne. No House of Laws would refuse to confirm the choice of such an assemblage."

"I think," Brand said, quietly, "that I will go round to the telegraph office. The time has arrived when I may take a hand in the game."

From the corridor came the sound of hurried footsteps. Old Basil, the major domo, threw open the door.

"The Baron Domiloff, your Excellency," he announced.

CHAPTER XV

THE room was large and dimly lit. Domiloff, beside himself with anger, saw only Ughtred's tall figure in resplendent uniform, standing beneath the great carved mantelpiece. He addressed him fiercely.

"How is this?" he exclaimed. "How came you here? What is the meaning of it?"

Ughtred looked at him for a moment gravely; then turned to Reist.

"Who is this person?" he asked. "Why does he address me in this fashion?"

Reist looked from one to the other with a faint smile.

"Permit me to present to your Highness," he said, "Monsieur, the Baron Domiloff, the representative of Russia in Theos."

Domiloff was white with rage.

"But it is a farce, this!" he exclaimed, fiercely. "Prince Ughtred and I are not strangers. I demand an explanation, sir."

"An explanation of what?" Ughtred asked.

Domiloff was beside himself. His black eyes burned like live coals, his cheeks were pallid almost to ghastliness, the muscles of his face were twitching.

"Of your presence here, sir," he exclaimed. "Of your flight from the palace, of your speech to the people. It was only an hour ago that you declared your-

self ignorant of the language. It seems that your statement was false!"

"Baron Domiloff is suffering, perhaps, from some hallucination," Ughtred said, quietly. "I have never, to the best of my belief, exchanged a word with him in my life. As to my flight from the palace, I have never yet entered it; nor do I propose to do so until I enter it as King of Theos."

Domiloff's senses were blinded with passion. The broader stature of the Prince, his more military bearing and different accent were things of which he took no note. He never once questioned the identity of the man whom he was addressing so fiercely.

"Your Highness will deny next," he exclaimed, "that you travelled with me from the frontier, that your word is pledged to sign a treaty with Russia."

Ughtred shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"The duties of a minister plenipotentiary," he remarked, "are, I believe, arduous. Baron Domiloff is suffering, without doubt, from overwork. It is unnecessary for me to remark that I reached here on horseback in company with my friend Reist, and that my word is pledged to sign nothing—least of all a treaty with Russia."

Domiloff was absolutely speechless with passion. Brand came out from the shadows amongst which he had been loitering, and faced the Russian.

"Do you know," he said, amiably, "I believe that I can clear up this little misunderstanding. Baron Domiloff is obviously mistaking you, Prince Ughtred, for me."

Domiloff turned upon him swiftly.

"And who, sir, are you?" he asked, harshly.

"Walter Brand, journalist—the *Daily Courier*, you know."

Domiloff caught up the lamp which stood on the long oaken table, and looked steadily from one to the other of the two men. When he set it down there was a queer, bitter, little smile upon his lips. The moment was one of unspeakable humiliation to him. He, a seasoned diplomatist, trusted by his master, feared and respected everywhere, had been befooled and outwitted —by an Englishman!

"I beg to offer my tardy congratulations to your Highness," he said, bowing to Ughtred. "My mistake was an unpardonable one. Yet this gentleman is, perhaps, also of the family of Tyrnaus? The resemblance is certainly remarkable."

"Mr. Brand is not connected in any way with my family," Ughtred answered. "The resemblance between us is merely a coincidence—to which it seems I owe my presence here, Baron Domiloff."

The Russian remained silent. He stood with bowed head, awaiting the storm.

"It appears," Ughtred continued, "that by proxy I was drugged and detained upon the frontier by your orders. For these doings I shall certainly, when the proper moment arrives, demand an explanation."

Domiloff raised his eyes for a moment. His expression was inscrutable.

"When the time comes, your Highness," he said, "I shall be prepared to satisfy you."

He passed from the room without any formal leave-taking. Reist looked after him thoughtfully.

"An enemy! Well, at least we are forewarned. Prince Ughtred, there will be no rest for you now, or, I fear, for many days. Domiloff has gone without doubt to the barracks. We must forestall him. I have ordered fresh horses to be brought to the door. Marie, some wine! We are thirsty! Wine from the King's cup!"

A servant, whose livery seemed but a slight modification of the native dress, brought some dust-covered bottles. Marie, with her own hand, unlocked an oaken cabinet, and produced some quaint horn cups, emblazoned in gold, with the Reist arms. One larger than the others she set before the Prince.

"They were a present," Reist said, "from Rudolph the Second to my great-grandfather. The cup you have is called the King's cup. No one who is not of Royal birth has ever drunk out of it. Permit me!"

He filled it to the brim, and Ughtred, who was thirsty, raised it gladly to his lips. Reist and Brand waited.

"To Theos and her King," Reist said, gravely. "This is our ancient toast. May her sons be ever brave, her rulers wise, and her soil fruitful! God save the King!"

They drank together. Marie stood at the head of the table, her dark eyes full of silent fires, her fingers nervously twitching. Ughtred turned towards her.

"You, too," he said, "must drink with us. Nay, I will have no refusal. You will honour me."

He held his cup towards her. She shook her head.

"Not from the King's cup," she said. "See, I have a goblet here."

But Ughtred was insistent.

"I have the weakness of my forefathers," he declared, "and I am superstitious. It will be for my good fortune, and the good fortune of Theos. You shall drink with me from the King's cup."

A spot of colour burned in the girl's cheeks. She drew back. A swift glance passed between brother and sister. It was Reist who answered.

"Your Highness," he said, gravely, "in this little corner of the earth we hold hard to all our old traditions, and for more than a hundred years—ay, since first that cup was fashioned, none have drunk from it save only those of the royal House, and——"

He hesitated. Ughtred waited for him to continue.

"And their betrothed."

Ughtred started. Marie looked downwards, and the deep colour mounted even to her forehead. There was a moment's silence. Then the spirit of obstinacy which had been kindled in Ughtred prevailed.

"I take upon my own shoulders," he said, smiling, "all the evil that may come of it, and I pray, Countess Marie, that you will honour me by drinking from my cup."

She lifted her head, and the eyes of brother and sister met once more—a single electric moment. Ughtred was conscious of little save of a masterful desire to have his own way. His blue eyes were filled with a compelling light. Perhaps, too, a little admiration was

apparent in his bronzed, handsome face. Marie took the cup, and raised it to her lips.

"I drink," she murmured, "to the welfare of Theos, and to her King!"

There was another brief but curiously intense silence. Reist was standing apart with folded arms and absorbed face—Brand, too, had set down his cup, and was watching Marie. Ughtred had an uneasy feeling that what he had regarded merely as an act of courtesy had become a sacrament. The entrance of a servant was a relief to them all.

"The horses, your Grace," he announced, "are at the side door. The people are lining the way to the barracks."

Reist roused himself quickly.

"Your Highness is ready!" he exclaimed. "There is not a moment to lose. We shall know now how deep is the corruption which Domiloff's gold has caused."

Ughtred drained his cup and stood up.

"I am ready!" he declared.

CHAPTER XVI

"It is not only your country's welfare," Domiloff said, "which trembles in the balance. It is her very existence. I appeal to you, General Dartnoff—to you, Bushkieff. If you accept this man, Theos as an independent country will soon be blotted from the map."

Domiloff stood leaning with his back against the long deal table. Gathered together before him were a dozen men or more in the undress uniform of the Moranian Guards. Dartnoff, his white hair brushed straight back from his forehead, a tall, soldierly figure notwithstanding his sixty years, stepped a little forward.

"My friend, Domiloff," he said, "we are gathered here, as you know, in a state of some indecision. I will frankly admit that as yet we have not made up our minds how to act. Yet it seems to me that you go a little far. We have more faith in ourselves and in the destinies of our ancient kingdom than you seem willing to give us credit for. The end might be as you say supposing we found ourselves involved with one of the great Powers. But let me assure you, Baron Domiloff, that the contest would be no bloodless one. Theos has held her own, beset though she has been by powerful enemies, for many centuries."

A little murmur of applause escaped from the lips of those gathered around him. Domiloff held up his hand.

"The past of your country," he exclaimed, "is a

magnificent chapter in history. It is the more incumbent upon you to see that she has a future. Warfare to-day has become a science. Reckless bravery is no longer the surety of success. Theos is without any of the modern appliances of war. Her artillery is ancient and her guns fit for the dust-heap. General Dartnoff, a heavy responsibility rests upon your shoulders."

Dartnoff stroked his long grey moustache thoughtfully.

"Domiloff, my friend," he said, "you appear a little flurried, but you are also very much in earnest. Now speak to us exactly the words which are in your heart. You have advice to give, eh? Well, we will listen."

Domiloff moved to the high bare window, and looked downwards towards the town. As yet there was no sign of the figures which he dreaded to see. He faced once more the little assemblage.

"Here are plain words," he said, speaking rapidly, and with rising colour. "If I have seemed evasive hitherto it is because I come to persuade, not to dictate, and I know that the tempers of you men of Theos are easily kindled. Nicholas of Reist brings to-day a forgotten descendant of the Tyrnaus family, and with your consent would make him King. I say with your consent, because the House of Laws is nothing to day but a farcical assembly, and they will do what Reist bids them. The real decision rests with you. Listen. Russia will refuse to recognize this man. If you accept him her restraining hand upon Turkey will be removed. Russia herself may not think it worth while to move against you, but even now in secret the Turks are massing upon your borders. They wait only for the signal."

Dartnoff nodded gravely.

"Well," he said, "let us hear what will happen to us supposing we accept your warning and refuse to recognize Ughtred of Tyrnaus."

"The protection of Russia," Domiloff cried, eagerly. "My master himself shall guarantee your independence. I will give you pledges. You will reserve for a friend and an ally the most generous of the Powers. But you must be quick," he added, with a sudden start. "Now is the time for you to act. Close the gates upon those who come here to-night. It shall be your answer."

Dartnoff shook his head.

"I cannot do that," he said. "Nicholas of Reist is a colonel in our army, and he has the right to enter here at any time."

There was the thunder of hoofs in the courtyard. Domiloff bit his lip and looked nervously around.

"Reist is a traitor," he exclaimed. "It is against the law to harbour a Tyrnaus."

"We will hear what our friend Nicholas of Reist has to say," Dartnoff answered, coldly. "You might perhaps find it advisable to retire, Baron Domiloff."

The door was thrown open. Nicholas and Ughtred entered. General Dartnoff stepped forward.

"General," Nicholas exclaimed, "and brother officers of the Thetian Guards. I have the honour to present you to Prince Ughtred of Tyrnaus."

Ughtred held out his hand frankly. But there was not one of them who did not bow low, after the manner of one making an obeisance rather than exchanging greetings.

"Your names are well known to me," Ughtred said. "I believe that by hereditary right I may call myself a colonel in your regiment and a brother officer."

Dartnoff bowed.

"Your Highness is pleased to remember what is undoubtedly a fact," he said. "The brave deeds of Captain Erlito in the Soudan have been a source of pride to all of us."

Ughtred smiled with pleasure—and Nicholas, with his hand upon his sword, addressed General Dartnoff in clear tones.

"General Dartnoff," he said, "I take the liberty of addressing you as Commander-in-Chief of the Thetian army. The Republic of Theos has ceased by reason of its own misdeeds to exist. I have always, as you know, refused to recognize its legislation. I claim that its decree abolishing the ancient monarchy and establishing a republic here was invalid and worthless. We have been made the laughing-stock of Europe by the gold-bought merchants and traitors who have presumed to occupy the high places of Theos. That is all at an end. It rests with us to restore honour and dignity to our country. There is but one way, but that a sure one, General Dartnoff and brother officers. We come here alone and unattended, but had we wished it we could have stormed your walls with half the population of Theos at our backs. I call upon you all to take the oath of allegiance to Ughtred of Tyrnaus, King of Theos, by divine right and the choice of the people."

General Dartnoff hesitated for a moment.

"Duke of Reist," he said, slowly. "You ask us to

take a step on the impulse of the moment from which there could be no drawing back, which for good or for evil must decide forever the destinies of our country. Whatever my own personal inclinations might be, I owe it to my brother officers, and to our deep sense of patriotism to consult with them for a few minutes."

Reist would have spoken hastily, but Ughtred checked him.

"General Dartnoff has spoken like a wise man," he said. "I am content to wait."

With folded arms, drawn to his full height, a commanding figure indeed, Ughtred of Tyrnaus stood by the window looking down upon the city and the country which he loved. General Dartnoff, surrounded by his officers, stood at the head of the table. In the further corner of the room where the shadows were deepest Domiloff lurked. He watched their faces, and he knew that the game was lost.

Only a very few minutes had gone by before Dartnoff approached the two men by the window.

"Your Highness," he said, to Ughtred, with marked respect. "There is one question which we feel constrained to ask."

Ughtred bowed.

"As many as you will," he answered.

"In your coronation oath you swear to maintain inviolate the independence of Theos. We would know if at all costs, though the cost should be famine, death or annihilation, will you keep this oath to the letter?"

"May God have no mercy upon me hereafter if ever I should depart from it one hair's-breadth," Ughtred an-

swered, with a sudden note of passion surging up in his tone. "I have no fancy for ruling a tributary state, sir. My forefathers have held safely for Theos through long generations the priceless gift of her liberty, and I would sooner die a thousand times over than that mine should be the hand to part with it."

General Dartnoff dropped on his knee, and drawing his sword from his scabbard, kissed its hilt.

"Your Majesty," he said, "we are all your faithful servants."

CHAPTER XVII

"WELL!"

Reist unfastened his sword. The State uniform of the Thetian Guards was cumbersome, and the day was hot.

"Let Basil bring me wine," he ordered. "The cathedral was a furnace. Everywhere the air seems hot with the shouting of the people."

"Up here," Marie said, "the clamour of voices has seemed incessant. I have never heard anything like it."

He walked up and down moodily. He was not sure whether the day had gone according to his liking. All the time her eyes questioned him.

"One thing," he declared, "is certain. Never again will a republic exist in Theos. Two generations of *roués* and madmen have not sickened this people of the House of Tyrnaus. Their loyalty is amazing."

"This man," she said, "is neither *roué* nor madman."

"It is true," he admitted.

He drank his wine, and as he set the glass down he felt her watching him. He understood the unspoken question in her deep, blue eyes.

"Of his betrothal," Reist said, slowly, "there was no word."

She drew herself up haughtily, a slim, stately figure in her magnificent white dress, caught up with jewels, and

the curious bejewelled head-dress which in Theos was the symbol of her rank. Yet Nicholas, who watched her closely, caught the gleam of something in her eyes which surprised him. It was more like relief than anger.

"Was our ancient usage explained to him?" she asked.

"Yes! I told him that an unmarried king was contrary to the time-sanctioned custom of our country. I told him that the announcement of his betrothal should be made at the moment of his coronation. The people expected it, and it would add immensely to his popularity."

"You told him that?"

"Yes!"

"And he answered?"

"He answered me with a jest. As yet he was not prepared to marry or to think of marriage. He preferred to retain his liberty."

She bit her lip, and the colour mantled in her cheeks.

"And you?"

He hesitated.

"It was after the words of the ceremony. He was my king. Between a Reist and a Tyrnaus the difference is purely accidental. The Reists are, indeed, the older and the nobler family. But between a Reist and his king there is a gulf. I cannot point my sword against him."

She walked restlessly up and down the room. Her thoughts were in confusion. For some vague, unacknowledged cause, her first impulse had been one of

relief. She had expected a formal offer for her hand, and she would scarcely admit even to herself that that expectation had been a dread. Yet to be ignored touched her pride keenly. She stopped by her brother's chair.

"What, then?" she asked. "Am I, the Countess Marie of Reist, to be flouted and passed over by a beggarly soldier, whose life has been spent as an adventurer, because the blood of the House of Tyrnaus is in his veins and chance has brought him to the throne? Nicholas, am I to look to you in vain to avenge this insult?"

The man's eyes flashed fire.

"Be patient, Marie," he answered. "Ughtred of Tyrnaus has lived in strange countries all his life, and imbibed the hateful modernisms of the West. Let us wait for a little. Perhaps he does not understand. Perhaps the time would seem to him too short even for a royal wooing. We will watch and wait. Meanwhile, listen. This is certain. If Ughtred of Tyrnaus lives out his reign, you and no other shall be his queen. That at least I can answer for."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"It may be," she said, "that when he is ready he may find his opportunity gone. The throne of Theos will be no bed of roses. In the meantime, I at least shall not go to the palace."

Reist looked doubtful.

"It was arranged," he reminded her, "that you should receive the wives of the Ministers. It is your right of birth."

"I renounce it then for the present," she answered. "Let him see how the fat old Kolashin woman will look on his left hand."

Her brother watched her thoughtfully. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

"Women are all alike," he said to himself, bitterly, on his way to the palace. "She is in love with Ughtred of Tyrnaus. She has drunk with him from the King's cup. It is enough!"

* * * * * *

"Baron Domiloff!"

She rose to her feet perplexed—a little annoyed. It was a visit which she did not understand. He came swiftly across the lawn to her, unattended and unannounced.

"I do not understand," she said, as he bowed low before her. "My servants have no authority to send you here. I am not receiving this afternoon—and you—you surely should be at the palace."

"I offer my most profound apologies, Countess," he said respectfully. "Your servants are not at fault. It was my persistence which prevailed."

"You have some message for me?" she asked, doubtfully.

"None," he answered. "I have come here on my own initiative. You will permit me the honour of a few minutes' interview. As to my absence from the palace, is that more likely to be remarked upon than yours, Countess?"

She waived the question.

"It is at least more surprising," she answered. "Do you wish your Austrian friends to have it all their own way with the King?"

"The Countess of Reist's sympathies are, I fear," he murmured, "with my rival."

"My sympathies," she answered, "are with neither of you. You each seek aggrandizement at our expense. I am a Thetian, and I believe that the less we have to do with foreigners the better. But I do not see, Baron Domiloff, what profit there can be in a discussion of this sort between you and me. I am still waiting for an explanation of your presence here. Which of my servants has proved faithless?"

"None," he answered. "I made my way here unknown to anybody. I came, Countess, to ask you a question."

"Well!"

He did not immediately reply. There was a good deal at stake, and her manner was not encouraging. In the end it came, however.

"Is it true what they are whispering in the city—that you have drunk with Ughtred of Tyrnaus from the King's cup?"

The Countess rose from her seat with flashing eyes. The Russian stood his ground, however, respectful, insistent, having well calculated the effect of his words.

"What an infamy—that you should dare to come here and ask me such a question. If you will not leave me at once, sir, I myself must return to the house. Your presence here is an insult."

Domiloff stood in the centre of the path, and his

manner was the manner of a man who has something to say, and will surely say it.

"Countess," he exclaimed, "I can claim no more with you, it is true, than the merest acquaintance, but I beg of you to consider whether I have the reputation of doing foolish things or asking foolish questions. You may not believe it, but I have the good of your country at heart. We in Russia desire an independent Theos. When I see her, therefore, drifting gradually towards certain destruction, I brave all things to save her."

She regarded him steadfastly, still angry, but a trifle curious.

"Explain yourself, sir—if any explanation is possible."

"Countess," he answered, "for the sake of your country, answer my question."

She hesitated. Her cheeks were flushed. She drew herself up proudly.

"You are well served, Baron," she said. "Your spies, it seems, can penetrate even within the walls of the Reist house. Yet the matter is no secret. I have drunk with Ughtred of Tyrnaus from the King's cup."

He inclined his head slowly.

"Yes," he said, "I was sure of it. Yet you have done well to tell me. Now I will tell you this. Ughtred of Tyrnaus before he had been King an hour sent to London to summon here an American woman with whom he had been—on the best terms in London."

She was thoughtful for a moment.

"You are sure of this?"

"I am sure of it," he answered.

"Is she of noble birth?"

Domiloff, who had been in New York, smiled faintly.

"She is an American," he answered. "Her father was a shopkeeper, her grandfather a labourer. He intends to marry her!"

"That is impossible," she answered, curtly. "The people of Theos would not permit it."

"When did a Tyrnaus," he asked, "ever consider the welfare or opinion of his subjects when the gratification of a caprice was concerned."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"And why," she asked, "do you bring this news to me?"

"To give you an opportunity of saving your country," he answered, promptly. "See, I will risk everything—I tell you the whole truth. Ughtred of Tyrnaus is not acceptable to my master as King of Theos. We know the race too well. They are not to be trusted—the integrity of the State is not safe in their hands. There is only one man who is the Heaven-designed ruler of Theos!"

"And he?"

"It is your brother!"

Now, indeed, she was interested. A rush of colour warmed her cheeks. The frigidity of her manner vanished as though by magic.

"I myself have told him so," she exclaimed. "When the people rose against the republic they called for him. It was the golden opportunity which he failed to seize."

"It will come again," he assured her, earnestly. "I

give you my word that it will come again. That shall be my care. Yours is to see that next time he is prepared."

"Why do you not yourself speak to him?" she asked.

He smiled.

"You know your brother. The knowledge should answer that question. He has sworn loyalty to Ughtred of Tyrnaus, and for good or for evil he will keep his vow. We must wait till the thing is inevitable."

"And I," she murmured, "I, too, am a Reist, and he is my king."

"You are the first lady in Theos," he answered, "and you will not be content to bend your knee day by day before a plebeian. I will prove to you that I am sincere. If the King seeks your hand in marriage, I will not raise a little finger against him. But we will not support another Tyrnaus in another reign of folly. We will not recognize a king who places by his side upon the throne the daughter of tradespeople."

"It would be infamous," she murmured.

"Dear lady," he said softly, "try to forget that I am a Russian, or that Russia was ever your fancied enemy. An independent Theos is my policy, it is your religion. Let us work hand in hand."

The old distrust was hard to smother. She gave him the tips of her fingers.

"You can speak with me again," she said. "I make no promises. I will watch."

CHAPTER XVIII

UGHTRED, with a deep sigh of relief, sank into an easy-chair, and mopped his forehead in most unkingly fashion. He had escaped for a moment into the royal ante-room.

"Nicholas," he exclaimed, "if I am to be preserved for the service of the State order me a whisky-and-soda. This is harder work than our ride from Castle Reist."

Reist touched the bell and smiled.

"It is not yet concluded," he said. "I have many yet upon my list who have not been presented to your Majesty. There must be no heartburnings to-night. We must make no enemies."

Ughtred sat up with a sudden sense of injury.

"Nicholas," he demanded, "where is your sister?"

Reist's face was imperturbable.

"My sister," he said, "regretted exceedingly her inability to be present. She will pay her respects to your Majesty later."

The King frowned. His manner was impatient.

"It is now that I require her help," he said. "The Baroness is an utter impossibility. Her French is unrecognizable, she remembers no one, and the woman herself with her dyed hair and feathers is a caricature. Your sister must really make an effort, Reist. She must come and help me out."

"I will see that your Majesty's wishes," Reist answered quietly, "are conveyed to her."

The King eyed him keenly. Reist then was concealing something. His sister's absence was not motiveless.

"On reflection," he said, "I desire to emphasize my wishes. Your sister's absence is significant, and might possibly be commented upon. You will go yourself and fetch her, Nicholas. Say that I desire her immediate presence."

"Your Majesty," Reist protested, "my sister may have to make her toilette. Her immediate return with me will doubtless be impossible."

"The Countess will use her own discretion as to the time she keeps me waiting," Ughtred answered coolly. "I have told you that I shall await your return."

Reist turned away with immovable face. Ughtred remained in the ante-room alone. He lit a cigarette, and took a pile of telegrams from the table by his side. Selecting the topmost he read it thoughtfully to himself.

"My best wishes to you and for the welfare of your kingdom. May my offering remain forever an ornament. May peace and happiness be the lot of your people and your own.—SARA VAN DECHT."

"A coronation present with such a wish," he said to himself, "must remain an enigma. Enter."

An attendant withdrew the curtain.

"Captain Hartzan, of the Artillery, desires a moment's audience with your Majesty," the servant announced.

The King nodded.

"Let him be shown in."

A young officer bowed low as he passed through the curtains.

"Your Majesty," he announced, "a messenger has arrived at the barracks from the English firm of Vickers, Son, and Maxim. He is in charge of a whole battery of Maxims and quick-firing pom-poms, and awaits instructions as to their delivery."

"I know nothing of them," the King answered. "I understood that the firm you mention had declined the orders of the late Government."

"It is true, your Majesty," the officer answered, "and in consequence we have scarcely a modern gun at the barracks. The battery which has arrived here was intended for the Russian Government, but was purchased, the person in charge informs me, by a private individual for cash, as a coronation present to your Majesty."

The King started.

"Are you sure that there is no mistake?" he asked.

"None, your Majesty," the officer answered. "The messenger is quite explicit. It is a princely gift. Colonel Dartnoff instructed me to make an immediate report to your Majesty."

Ughtred for a moment was puzzled.

"I know of no one," he said reflectively, "who could make such a present."

The young officer hesitated.

"The artillery man in charge, your Majesty, claims to have seen the donor's cheque. It was a draft upon

Rothschilds, drawn by an American of the name of Van Decht."

Ughtred caught up the telegram by his side. His eyes were suddenly bright. He understood.

"You will inform the agent in charge," he said, "that I will receive him to-morrow, and arrange a date to inspect the battery."

The young officer bowed respectfully, and withdrew. Reist took his place. The King eyed him sternly, for at first it seemed to him that so prompt a return was significant.

"Well, sir!"

Reist lifted the curtain. Marie stood there in Court dress, her long train held by pages in the Reist livery, her neck and arms ablaze with jewels, a coronet of pearls upon her forehead. She was a little pale, and she carried herself with more than ordinary dignity. The King rose, and, bowing low, raised her hands to his lips.

"You are very welcome, Countess of Reist," he said, "although you are amongst the latest of those who have come to offer their good wishes."

"I have come," she answered, "in obedience to your Majesty's commands."

"Commands!" He smiled good-humouredly. "It is very unkind of you," he said, "to have thought of deserting me on such a day as this."

"My brother ——"

"Oh, Nicholas is invaluable," the King declared, lightly. "He can tell me what to say to the men, but it is in receiving the women I need your help."

"The Baroness Kolashin is as well acquainted with our countrywomen as I," Marie answered. "I did not doubt but that her aid would be sufficient."

"The Baroness," Ughtred answered, "has done her best; but another hour by her side would rob me of the few wits I have left. I should like to know for what special sin I was committed to her charge."

Marie shrugged her shoulders ever so slightly, but she did not smile.

"I am at your Majesty's service," she said.

Ughtred was puzzled. In what manner had he offended her?

"If my message seemed to you peremptory," he said, "will you not ascribe it to my desire to taste the full measure of my powers? I know nothing of the privileges of a king save what I have read in books. But it seems to me that included amongst them must surely be the privilege of choosing one's companions—and one's friends."

"Your Majesty," Marie answered, "may find that a rash assumption. It may lead to disappointment. Friends are scarcely to be made in a day, or to order. You must send for some of those whom you have left behind in England."

He looked at her, curious to know if anything lurked behind those words.

"Mine has not been the sort of life," he said, quietly, "which leads to the making of friendships. I have been a wanderer always, and a lonely one. I had hoped to fill the empty places—here."

There was a note of appeal in his tone—dignified, yet

not in a sense without pathos. He glanced at Nicholas, but he looked first at Marie. A faint touch of colour flushed her cheeks. Her manner was visibly softened.

"I trust that your Majesty may not be disappointed," she said. And her eyes fell before his for the first time.

A crash of music reminded them of those who still waited to bow before the King. So they passed out into the great ballroom, and mounting the dais, Marie stood on the King's left hand. The room was a blaze of light, of brilliant uniforms and beautiful dresses. At ten o'clock, Reist came up with a look of relief upon his face, and a gleam of excitement in his eyes.

"The English Minister and his wife, your Majesty," he murmured. "It is excellent. The others will follow."

The news spread. A little flutter of joy rippled through the room. The coming of this dignified, kindly old man, with his grey hair and single decoration, was the one thing needed. Theos had taken to herself a King, asking leave of no one, but the countenance of some at least of the Powers was a vital thing. At the informal coronation, rushed through by Reist and his friends, not one of the Ministers had been present. Domiloff, with smooth face and with many lying regrets, had presented an interdictory note from Russia, but owing to the peculiar conditions prevailing there had not been until after the coronation any properly-appointed person to receive it. The late foreign Minister had refused it with a smile and a polite word of regret, and his example had been followed by every member of the Royalist party. There was, they explained, at the moment no government, no officials, no Minister. Their

various appointments were arranged for and would be confirmed immediately after the coronation. Until then they were only private persons. So Domiloff, with a suave jest and a shrug of his shoulders, shut himself up in his house, while the cathedral bells clashed and the cannon roared from the walls.

The English Minister was followed in quick succession by the representatives of France and Austria, and with their coming a certain sense of restraint passed away from the brilliant assemblage. Before there had been a certain sense of unreality in the whole thing. The tone of the rejoicings had been feverish—who could tell but that in a week this thing might not have passed away like a mirage. Now a heartier note altogether prevailed, especially amongst the men. There were no more side glances, or shrugged shoulders—the volcano no longer trembled beneath their feet. Dancing commenced, and the King stood up with Marie of Reist. At supper she remained on his right hand. Many people spoke to Reist of this.

"It is excellent, Duke," declared old Baron Kolashin, once Commander-in-Chief of the Army. "Theos needs no outside alliance. It means only entanglement. That," he inclined his head to where Marie and the King were talking, "will send Theos crazy with joy."

Reist shook his head.

"You anticipate, my dear Kolashin," he answered. "Our Court circle is, as you know, small, and Marie's rank entitles her to receive. But this is only their second meeting. I am sure that as yet no such idea has entered the King's head."

Kolashin twirled his fierce moustache, and smiled knowingly.

"Eh, but my friend, there is a report that they have drunk together from the King's cup. How about that?"

"It is true," Reist admitted, "but the King knows nothing of the history of the cup. His offer was one of gallantry—no more. They were children together."

The general chuckled.

"Marie is a beautiful girl," he said. "There is none like her in Theos. Eh, but if I were young again."

He went off smiling to himself.

Reist was touched on the arm by Brand.

"May I speak to you for a moment, Duke?"

"By all means."

"There is still one of the foreign Ministers absent besides Domiloff."

Reist nodded.

"Effenden Pascha. There is yet time, however."

"Effenden Pascha is not coming," Brand said.

Reist eyed him sharply.

"How do you know that?"

"I was at the palace gates," Brand answered, "when Effenden Pascha drove up. He was on the point of entering when he was accosted by our friend Domiloff."

Reist's face grew black as night.

"The hound!" he murmured. "Go on!"

"They stayed talking for five minutes or more. Eventually they both reentered Effenden Pascha's carriage and were driven off."

"The wolf and the dog," Reist cried, fiercely. "Let them beware how they bark at the gates of Theos."

He was white almost to the lips with anger. Brand watched him curiously.

"I do not believe that you people like the Turks," he remarked.

Reist turned upon him with a sudden violent gesture. His voice was low, but charged with passionate hate.

"Like them! To us they are as vermin, a pest upon the face of the earth. You wonder why! I tell you that it is because we know them, because their border villages are in touch with ours, we know their life and the manner of it. I could tell you things which you dare not put in print; stories which, if English people read in your paper they would brand you a liar. So, my friend, Brand, believe this. There is not a true Thetian breathing who would not rather die himself and kill his wife and children than that the Turks should enter Theos. . . . Pardon me!"

He moved away with a quick, expressive gesture. Brand remained in his corner, and presently the King with Marie of Reist upon his arm passed by. They paused before him.

"Come, Brand," Ughtred remarked, "why so thoughtful? You must dance, my friend."

"Your Majesty," Brand answered, "I was pondering upon the inequalities of life. Yesterday I was a King, and a most uncomfortable position it was! To-day you are King—and"—he glanced at Marie—"it is a trial to one's disposition to refrain from envy."

Marie detached her hand softly from the King's sleeve.

"So gallant a speech, sir," she said, smiling, "must be rewarded. You have not yet asked me to dance!"

CHAPTER XIX

"It seems to me," she said, quietly, "that all men must be ambitious, that the love of power must be a part of their very existence."

"In England," he remarked, "we are more circumscribed, our limits are more exact. Yet I suppose in our small way we all flutter our wings."

"I have a curiosity to understand things," she said, leaning back and fanning herself slowly. "Help me to understand yourself."

He smiled.

"Do I puzzle you then?"

"A little—yes!"

"How?"

She looked at him reflectively out of her dark, full eyes. He looked into them once and turned away—he scarcely knew why.

"You do not seem to me," she said, "like a man who would be content with small things. You outwitted Domiloff himself. Yet you call yourself a writer, and you are perhaps content?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Why not? There is excitement in it. One travels everywhere, meets strange types of people, penetrates into unknown countries, carries often one's life in one's hands. Oh, it's not a bad life."

"Perhaps," she answered, "I do not quite under-

stand. Our newspapers in Theos are different. You then are content?"

Again that curious searching gaze from the most beautiful eyes into which he had ever looked. Brand, in whose life women had played a small part, was unaccountably ill at ease. His easy nonchalance of manner had deserted him. Content! He looked for a moment into his future, and was astonished to find in it a new emptiness. She bent over towards him, and at her touch a thrill went through his veins, and set his heart beating to a new music.

"Just now," she murmured, "you told the King—that you envied him. Was it true?"

"For the moment," he answered, "I think that it was."

"You then would like to be a king?"

He laughed, and answered her with a forced lightness.

"I? Not I! It would not suit me at all."

"What did you mean, then?" she persisted.

"I think," he said, "that I was a little lonely. You see I know none of these people. I am a stranger, and I felt a little out of my element. And then—then he came by with you, and—well, I wished I were in his place."

She laughed very softly.

"So far as I am concerned," she murmured, "you very soon had your wish."

"It was very kind of you," he said, "to take pity upon me."

"I think that I wanted to talk to you again," she said. "I am tired of all these people. Tell me, Mr. Brand, how long will you stay on in Theos?"

"I am not sure," he answered, "perhaps a week, per-

haps a month. It depends upon my paper. They may recall me at any time."

She frowned, and stopped fanning herself.

"Why do you go back?" she said, abruptly. "Why do you not stay in Theos?"

"There is no place here for me," he answered. "I am a stranger."

"You say," she continued, "that in your own country the limits of life are being drawn closer. Why do you not make for yourself a career in a country like this? Theos has need of such men as you."

He shook his head.

"Theos has her own sons to direct her future. I am a stranger."

"So is the King!"

"But he is a Tyrnaus. The people have chosen him for their King."

"You are his friend," she said, "and to you I may not say very much. But he is young, and he may make mistakes. He comes of a family who have done much evil here."

Brand was startled.

"I thought that you and your brother were his chief supporters," he said. "People are saying, too ——"

Her fan stopped. Brand hesitated.

"Please to go on," she said, imperiously.

"It is not my affair," he continued, awkwardly. "I ought not to have alluded to it. But they are speaking of the possibilities of a marriage between you and him."

The slow waving of white feathers recommenced. He felt that she was looking at him; almost in spite of

himself their eyes met. He looked away with hot cheeks and burning eyes. Was this girl a trained coquette, or ——

"I do not think," she said, "that you need consider that. I do not think that I shall ever marry Ughtred of Tyrnaus."

Despite himself he spoke the thoughts which had filled his mind.

"You," he said, "are ambitious. Have you no desire to be a queen?"

"I love power," she answered, "but I am a woman —and I do not wish to marry Ughtred of Tyrnaus."

Brand told himself fiercely that he was a fool. Yet the music was suddenly sweeter, his vague antipathy to the King had vanished into thin air, the taste of life was sweeter between his teeth.

"You may think me mad," he said, "but I am—not sorry—to hear it."

There was a short silence. It was evident that if she thought him mad she was not displeased.

"Some day," she said, presently, "I should like to talk to you of Theos. I believe that before long there will be great changes here. A new order of things may come—and you are one of those whom Theos may look to for help."

"I?" he repeated. "But, indeed, Countess, you are overrating me. I am only a journalist. I know nothing of statecraft."

"You are a strong man," she answered, "and strong men are scarce. Promise me that you will not leave Theos without letting me know."

"I am not likely to do that," he said. "If ever I can help you or your country I would do it willingly. But you will remember that I am the friend of Ughtred of Tyrnaus."

"You may have other friends—is it not so?"

The significance of her speech once more filled him with new emotions—half-delightful—half-uneasy. A sudden passionate impulse came to him to seize the little white hand all ablaze with jewels which hung over the arm of her chair so near to his. He mastered it with a stupendous effort. They sat there in a silence which was to him almost ecstatic. Then Nicholas of Reist stood suddenly before them, his black eyebrows contracted into a lowering frown.

"Marie," he said, "the King is asking for you."

She shrugged her shoulders, and rose without haste.

"I think," she said, "that I have done my duty—and I am tired. I should like to go home, Nicholas."

"You must make your adieux, in any case," he answered, giving her his arm, and ignoring Brand. "No one is leaving yet, and there is to be a display of fire-works in the grounds."

She looked over her shoulder to Brand with a parting smile.

"Good-night, Mr. Brand. I have enjoyed my rest very much."

He bowed low, and remained for a moment alone in the Palm House. Through the open windows came the sound of ascending rockets hissing through the still night air—the grounds were ablaze with lights. He passed out, and mingled with the crowd of people.

CHAPTER XX

Illuminations, fireworks, and the thunder of saluting cannon closed the day. The excited crowds dispersed slowly to their homes, the National Hymn ceased at last to echo through the squares and streets. Towards midnight Domiloff, who had left the palace early, knocked at the door of a large white house in the Place des Étrangers, and was at once admitted. He passed into a hall furnished after the Turkish style, and into the presence of Effenden Pascha.

The Turk was still in the uniform and jewelled turban which he had donned for the reception at the palace. He greeted Domiloff eagerly. They conversed in French.

"It is well that you have come," the Turk exclaimed. "To-morrow it will be known in Constantinople that you and I alone of the foreign Ministers failed to attend the reception of the new King. How am I to explain this, Domiloff?"

Domiloff nodded, and lit a cigarette.

"Listen, Effenden Pascha," he said, quietly. "I have within the last few minutes received a message from St. Petersburg ordering me to recognize on behalf of Russia, Ughtred of Tyrnaus. It does not suit my country just at present to be at variance with the other Powers. Accordingly I must present myself at the palace to-morrow. You, however, are outside the concert. Now, listen. I speak truth, do I not, when I say

that the ancient enmity between your country and Theos is still a live thing—that but for the Powers your soldiers would long ago have pillaged Theos, and sacked the city?"

"It is true," Effenden Pascha admitted. "What then?"

"The accession of Ughtred of Tyrnaus is not approved of by my master. As I have explained, we cannot move ourselves, for the time is not yet ripe for a European war. This, however, we can undertake. If your master should refuse to recognize the new sovereign of Theos, and should think the time ripe for an effort to regain what was once a part of the Ottoman Empire, there shall be no interference. Russia will not interfere, and Russia will see that no other Power does. You follow me?"

"Perfectly," Effenden Pascha answered, quietly; "and afterwards?"

"The afterwards," Domiloff remarked, with a shrug of the shoulders, "is of your own making."

The Turk shook his head slowly.

"Domiloff," he said, "so far all is well. But your price? Your master serves no one without a price. Wherein is to come your advantage?"

"We have none to gain," Domiloff answered. "Simply we object to a Tyrnaus once more upon the throne of Theos."

The Turk moved towards the door.

"There is still time," he said. "I go to pay my respects to King Ughtred."

"You are too late," Domiloff cried.

"Not so," the Turk answered, pointing through the trees. "The palace is still a blaze of light."

Domiloff swore softly between his teeth.

"Do not be so hasty, my friend," he exclaimed.

"My country," Effenden Pascha answered, "is too often the tool of yours. We are to do the work, and at the last moment—the Bear's paw. We are to conquer Theos for Russia."

"You are entirely wrong," Domiloff declared earnestly. "The eventual possession of the country may become a matter of private treaty between your Court and mine, but I will give you the word of the Czar that if for any reason we should desire to occupy it you shall have a *quid pro quo*. You shall have a free hand in Asia Minor and a loan."

"You will give me pledges of this nature in writing?" Effenden Pascha asked.

"Certainly!"

The Turk walked to the window with a smile.

"Allah!" he exclaimed. "It will be good to hear once more the guns roar in the Balkans. We Turks, Domiloff, are a nation of soldiers, and these long intervals of peace are ill for us."

Outside there was a sudden tramp of feet. Into the square filed a company of soldiers. They halted in front of the house. The two men exchanged rapid glances.

"What is this?" the Turk asked, quickly.

"Heaven knows," Domiloff answered. "Listen!"

A thunderous summons at the door; voices in the hall. An officer in the uniform of the Thetian Guards entered, bearing a letter.

"To Monsieur Domiloff," he announced, saluting.

Domiloff opened it without a word. As he read he grew pale to the lips.

"SIR,—I have the honour to enclose your passport and safe conduct to the frontier of Theos. I have informed the Czar, your Imperial master, of the circumstances which render your further presence in my dominions displeasing to me.

(Signed) "UGHTRED OF TYRNAUS,
"REX."

Domiloff crushed the letter in his fingers.

"Well, sir?" he said to the officer. "In the morning I will seek an audience of his Majesty."

"I regret, sir," the officer answered, "that my orders allow me no latitude whatever. A special train is waiting, and my instructions are to escort you to the frontier."

Domiloff drew the Turk on one side.

"Listen," he said, "this is a bold stroke. I half expected it. Ughtred of Tyrnaus has courage at least. I go straight to St. Petersburg. I will give pledges of what I have promised to your Minister there."

Effenden Pascha bowed. He was most uncomfortable, but there was a certain pleasure in witnessing the discomfiture of the wily Russian.

"I shall await your news," he answered.

Domiloff and his escort departed. Effenden Pascha at once undressed, sent for his physician and sought his bed. Before morning Theos knew of the sudden attack of malignant fever which had most unfortunately laid hold of him at the moment of starting to attend the reception at the palace.

CHAPTER XXI

UGHTRED slackened his reins about his horse's neck, and turning round, called to Brand, who was sitting a few yards away making some rapid sketches. The King's cheeks were flushed with colour, and his eyes were bright.

"What do you think of that, Brand?" he asked proudly.

He pointed to where a cloud of dust hung round the last company of galloping Thetians. The roll of the drums and the shrill music of the fifes still reached them.

"They are born horsemen, and born soldiers, your Majesty," Brand answered, with enthusiasm. "I only wish that there were more of them."

Ughtred smiled.

"The mountains are our chief protection," he said, with a little wave of his arm. "The passes through which men could be poured into Theos are narrow, and for defensive purposes a small, perfectly-trained army is sometimes as useful as a large one. I am proud of my army, Brand."

"You have reason," Brand answered. "I am even now trying to make Europe understand what manner of men these are."

General Dartnoff came galloping up.

"If your Majesty will ride now to Pinter's Pass," he said, "you will be able to trace the progress of the attack."

The King and Brand rode off together, followed by his small bodyguard.

"Your people have said nothing yet about recalling you?" Ughtred asked.

"Nothing," Brand answered. "I think that Theos is still being watched with interest."

"And you yourself?"

Brand looked straight ahead.

"I am content here," he answered. "I shall be sorry to leave."

There was the thunder of hoofs on the turf a short distance away, and Marie of Reist in a white riding-habit and the military cap of the Thetian Guards galloped past. Her lithe, superb figure was at its best—she managed her charger with the easy confidence of a born horsewoman. Ughtred eyed her thoughtfully.

"There are not many women like that—even in England, Brand," he remarked.

"Your Majesty is quite right," Brand answered. "The Countess of Reist is the most beautiful woman whom I have ever seen."

Ughtred smiled and looked down into the valley. They reined in their horses upon a small knoll.

"I think that I know one who is more beautiful," the King said, in an undertone. "I heard this morning from our friends, the Van Dechts, Brand. They are travelling in Italy, and may come on here."

Brand shrugged his shoulders.

"Your Majesty will find their presence welcome?" he asked.

The King looked at him in surprise.

"Surely! They are friends of mine. It would give me great pleasure to have them here. Why not?"

Brand hesitated.

"I wondered," he said, slowly, "if they might not find their presence here a little equivocal. Your Majesty is no longer a private individual, and Mr. and Miss Van Decht, however agreeable in themselves, are not of the rank which entitles them to a familiar footing at your Court."

Ughtred looked at his companion in some surprise.

"That speech," he remarked, "might have come from Nicholas of Reist—from you, my friend, it sounds strangely."

"I admit it," Brand answered. "For myself it is true that I am a democrat, but then I am only a journalist. I have noticed that the few nobles who remain in Theos are aristocrats to the backbone. I believe that you find their principles absolutely rock-bound."

The King frowned. His eyes had rested upon Marie of Reist, sitting upright in her saddle, and watching eagerly for the development of the sham fight.

"Well, well," he said, "we shall see! I wish to see the Van Dechts here, and it is useless to meet trouble halfway. Be so good, Brand, as to convey my regards to the Countess of Reist, and suggest that she join us. Our position is better chosen than hers."

Brand cantered over to her side and repeated the message. She rode with him towards the King.

"You have been much occupied lately, perhaps," she said to Brand. "My brother tells me that you have been invisible."

"I have been busy," he answered. "Perhaps because of my small share in events here. I have become wonderfully interested in Theos. I have been making excursions in all directions. I want to understand many things which are hard for a stranger to form a right idea of."

She smiled.

"Then why do you not come to me?" she said. "I can tell you very much about Theos. I can tell you about the country people, and how they live. Did I not ask you to come, Mr. Brand? You are very ungallant."

He met a glance from her dark eyes, and his pale cheeks were suddenly flushed.

"You were good enough to say that you would receive me," he answered. "If I may come, then, I will."

"My brother has shown me in the English papers some of the things which you have written about Theos," she continued. "I cannot tell you what pleasure they gave me. It is a wonderful gift, yours, Mr. Brand. When one reads one seems to see a picture of the whole place. You have written wonderfully of your adventures here."

"And yet," he said, in a low tone, "the adventure here which was most interesting to me, which I shall never forget so long as I live, I have not written about at all. It is for the memory only."

Again their eyes met. He was very bold, this Englishman. Yet though her eyebrows were slightly raised she did not rebuke him.

"I think, perhaps," she said, "that we had better obey the royal command."

She touched her horse with the whip, and they galloped up the hillside. Ughtred watched them closely as they rode up. He made room for Marie by his side. Brand had perforce to fall behind. They talked together eagerly of the manœuvres. The girl was thoroughly well versed in the situation.

"I believe from the south," she said, "that Theos is unassailable. If only we had more heavy guns for the passes."

"You have seen the new battery?" Ughtred asked.

She nodded.

"Yes. The Maxims are wonderful."

"I am expecting," he said, "that the donor will be paying us a visit here soon."

She looked up inquiringly.

"An American was it not?"

"An American and his daughter, Mr. and Miss Van Decht. If they come I hope that I may count upon you, Countess, to help me make their visit an enjoyable one."

"I will do all that I can," she answered, coldly. "I have never met any Americans. They must be wonderful people. In England they are intermarrying, is it not so, with the aristocracy?"

"There have been many such marriages," Ughtred assented.

"It is the worst of England," she murmured. "A great nation, but indeed a nation of shopkeepers. Amongst the nobles, the pride of race seems to have died out. The fear of poverty is to them as the fear of death. Ah, see."

Through the pass below was a sudden movement. Little puffs of smoke burst out all over the hillside. General Dartnoff and his staff came galloping up.

"Your Majesty," he said, saluting, "I shall ask for your congratulations on behalf of Colonel Bushnieff. The attacking force have been entrapped into the pass, and are now subject to a terrible cross-fire. Bushnieff's guns are so placed that every one of them is effectual. I go to give the award. The defending force have easily triumphed."

"I will come with you," the King answered.

Brand drew back to let them pass. Marie also lingered. In a moment they were alone. He turned to her.

"You are coming?" he asked.

"I think not. I am tired. My servants are below. I shall return to Theos."

Brand hesitated.

"My horse is lame," he remarked.

"I do not wonder at it," she answered. "You have been galloping about without choosing your way."

"I too am tired," he continued, thoughtfully.

Her lips parted.

"I shall be glad of your escort, Mr. Brand."

They rode slowly across the open country in the waning day. Before them on the hilltop were the grey towers and the piled-up houses of Theos, a picturesque medley with their red roofs and white fronts now fast becoming blurred in the gathering twilight. As they neared the road a sudden waft of perfume from the lavender-fields beyond filled the air, and a breath of

wind came sweeping through the yellow corn-fields. Brand, with his hat in his hand, looked thoughtfully about him.

"I think," he said, "that no man could be born here who would not die for such a country as this. I believe that I am beginning to understand what patriotism might be."

Her face lit up in a moment.

"It is beautiful," she said, "to hear you say that. I wish, Mr. Brand," she added, softly, "that it were your country too. Then we should be sure of one good patriot."

"I think," he said, "that if trouble came to Theos I should be proud to reckon myself amongst her sons. I have never seen country people like yours. I have ridden into the furthest parts, and wherever I have seen men and women I have heard singing. I have been greeted like a friend. I have been offered bread and wine before I could even dismount. How they toil, too. No wonder the soil is fruitful."

"Oh, it is good to hear you talk like this," she cried, with a sudden little burst of passion. "The love of my country is in my blood—it is part of me. I could not live if Theos were dishonoured, and lately there have been so many sorrows. I seem to have found myself listening, and over the land there has been silence, no longer the whistling of the men and the singing of women. It has been as though something terrible has always been about to happen. It is a fancy, of course. Nicholas laughs at me. It is foolish! But the love of Theos is more to me than the love of life. I fear for

her when for myself I have no fear. Tell me, Mr. Brand, this seems strange talk to you."

"I know Theos, and I know you," he answered. "I understand."

She did not speak again for some time, but he saw that her eyes were full of tears, and he kept his face turned from her. When at last they passed into the city she spoke to him softly.

"I am indeed very foolish," she said, "but just now I am anxious. Theos seems to have made for herself new enemies. The coming of Ughtred of Tyrnaus has provoked Russia, and it is the one country which I fear most. You will come and see me soon, Mr. Brand?"

He bowed over the hand which she held half-shyly out. It was not a form of greeting in which she often indulged.

"I will surely come," he answered.

He left her at the Reist house and rode slowly towards his own quarters. Already the streets were lined with people awaiting the return of the King and the troops. Torches were waved hither and thither. In the open space in front of the palace a huge bonfire had been lit. Everywhere was the pleasant murmur of cheerful voices. Further down the street they were singing in a low rhythmical chant the National Anthem. Now the King was in sight, and a roar of voices welcomed him. The front of the palace blazed out in a fire of illuminations, a shower of rockets shrieked upwards from the park. The King was coming. Long live the King!

CHAPTER XXII

Sara Van Decht leaned back in her basket-chair and looked across the cobbled street, across the trim square where the miniature fountain was playing, to where a cluster of red-roofed, white-fronted houses were huddled together in picturesque confusion.

"Well, I think it's delightful!" she exclaimed. "I never could have imagined anything so picturesque—or so restful."

Mr. Van Decht scratched his chin thoughtfully and selected a cigar from his case.

"It is restful," he admitted. "I can't say that I'm quite accustomed to taking my meals upon the pavement, even under an awning, and there is an odour of garlic about the hotel which I don't altogether relish. I grant you that it is restful, though! There's no denying that!"

The girl laughed softly.

"Poor old dad," she exclaimed. "I guess it's selfish of me to drag you all across Europe to this little bit of a country, but I couldn't help it a bit. I positively must see Ughtred with a crown on his head and a sceptre in his hand before we go back. It's too delicious. Now I wonder how we ought to let him know that we are here."

"Telephone!"

She laughed again—laughed till the tears stood in her eyes.

"Father, you must try to be more mediæval," she exclaimed. "Fancy ringing up a king!"

"Send a boy round with a note then," he suggested, "or shall I stroll round to the palace and let them know? I'd just as soon. It's only a few minutes' walk."

"I will write," she decided, "but there is no hurry. We will go out for a walk presently and look at these dear, quaint little shops. There are heaps of things I want to buy."

Mr. Van Decht rose suddenly from his chair.

"Jehosophat!" he cried. "What's that?"

It was a horse-car, old-fashioned, rickety, with canvas awnings, drawn wearily along by an aged horse. Mr. Van Decht eyed it with vast curiosity.

"Jehosophat," he repeated. "I'd like to take that whole affair right back with us and sell it to the first dime museum that'd give the price. Look at the bonnet on the horse's head, Sara, and the bell! My, how she bumps! I must have a talk with your King, Sara. My number-three installation is what is wanted here with overhead wires and forty Cambridge wagons. With cheap labour and water transport I guess it would be a light contract. I'm going to board the next that comes along, Sara, and get the thing into my head."

"The streets look very narrow and hilly for cars, father."

"Guess the whole place wants straightening out a bit," Mr. Van Decht admitted. "If your King wants

to make this place go, Sara, he's got to imbibe a few Western notions, and the sooner the better."

"You shall talk to him," Sara remarked, with a little smile at the corner of her lips. "I am sure that he will be interested."

"I guess I can give him some ideas," Mr. Van Decht remarked, puffing vigorously at his cigar. "You'd better write that note, Sara."

"In a moment, father. It's so fascinating to watch these country people with their baskets. Look! There is something you can't beat in New York, anyhow."

Up the steep, narrow road came a company of horse-soldiers—a gay sight—in flashing helmets, plumes, and the soft blue uniform of the Thetian Guards. A band up at the palace played them in. The people rushed to the right and to the left, lined the pavements and shouted a greeting. Then suddenly every head was uncovered, and a little respectful murmur rippled through the crowd.

"The King! Long live the King!"

Sara rose eagerly from her place at the table. They were virtually upon the pavement—a little extended near the hotel and dotted about with tiny round tables. It was Ughtred who rode at the head of the little troop of soldiers, and suddenly their eyes met. A sharp word of command broke from his lips. He dismounted and crossed the street towards them, drawing off his heavy white gloves as he came.

"Welcome!" he cried. "Welcome to Theos."

He took Sara's hands in his and held them tightly.

"This," he said, "is charming of you. One moment!"

He beckoned to the officer who had been riding by his side, and gave a few brief orders. The troop passed on. Reist and a younger man in dark riding-clothes remained.

"If you will allow me," Ughtred said, "I will take a cup of coffee with you. There is a garden here, I believe."

The hotel proprietor came hurrying out. Reist explained what was required. They made their way into a semi-public garden, which was instantly cleared of chance loiterers. A table was set in a shady corner.

"Mr. Van Decht," Ughtred said, "I must shake hands with you. You are most welcome. I appreciate your coming here immensely."

"My daughter," Mr. Van Decht explained, "has been set upon this trip ever since your friend Brand began his letters upon Theos in the *Daily Courier*. They have been very widely read, sir. We must congratulate you upon having taken hold of your kingdom so firmly."

"You are very good," Ughtred answered. "Brand has been a God-send to us. The position here has been fairly represented to England, and, in fact, Europe, through his reports. He, too, will be delighted to see you again. Miss Van Decht, you must allow me to present Captain Hartzan of the Artillery—the Duke of Reist you already know. Now, when did you arrive?"

"Last night," Sara answered. "That dear little train of yours brought us from the frontier. We scarcely expected to see you so soon."

"It is my great good-fortune," Ughtred answered. "I go every morning to the fortifications to direct the artillery practice. The Van Decht battery has been in action this morning," he added, smiling.

"I presume, sir, that this is a warlike country!" Mr. Van Decht remarked.

A shadow crept over the King's face.

"It is not our choice," he answered. "We are surrounded by dangerous enemies, and we are a very small nation. Our security depends solely upon our readiness to resist attack. For these last two months I have had to forget that I am a King, and remember only that I am Commander-in-Chief of our little army."

"I presume that you are not anticipating any immediate trouble, sir?" Mr. Van Decht asked.

The King glanced round. Already he was learning the lesson of caution.

"The history of Theos," he said, "is doubtless unknown to you. Turkey is our old and historic enemy, and her attitude towards us just now is, to say the least of it, threatening. We trust to our inoffensiveness and the good-will of the Powers to preserve our independence, but we judge it best to be prepared so far as possible to fight our own battles. Well, Crasten, what are you bringing us?"

The hotel proprietor bowed low, and filled some finely-cut glasses with liqueur from a dusty and carefully cradled bottle.

"The fin champagne, your Majesty, was brought from the cellars of Louis Philippe by my father. I trust your Majesty will approve."

Ughtred sipped it, and did approve. He accepted some coffee also, and broke a roll in his fingers.

"This is my longest fast," he explained, laughing. "We ride out at six to escape the heat. Part of my afternoon I spend at the barracks and part at the House of Laws."

"It appears to me, sir, that you find pretty considerable to do," Mr. Van Decht remarked. "I'd an idea that royalty had an easier time of it."

"A good many people share that idea, Mr. Van Decht," Ughtred answered, good-humouredly. "For myself, I never worked half so hard in all my life. But then, it is work I love, and for my country, which is very dear to me. Some day I hope, when things are more settled, to be able to drop the military part of my labours, and give all my attention to the development of my country."

Mr. Van Decht nodded. He was greatly enjoying the fin champagne.

"You're right there, sir," he declared. "Make a nation strong commercially, and she'll hold her own in time against the world. I guess you're a travelled man, sir, and you won't mind a stranger remarking that in some ways you're a little behind the times here."

Sara's eyes twinkled with amusement. The young officer, who understood a little English, glanced at Reist, and was speechless.

"You mustn't mind father," Sara exclaimed. "You know he's a terrible democrat, and utilitarian to the backbone. He's dying to introduce electric cars here and electric light."

"Why, you want them bad enough," her father admitted. "I don't suppose we've a town of half the size in the States where we haven't both, and this a capital city too."

"Mr. Van Decht is quite right," Ughtred said, gravely, "only one has always to remember that this is a very poor country, and we can't afford to pay for luxuries."

"I guess those cars would pay for themselves before long, sir," Mr. Van Decht declared.

"It is very likely," Ughtred answered. "I'm sure that if any capitalist were disposed to undertake the commercial part of it, there would be very little difficulty about the concession."

Mr. Van Decht rose up briskly.

"If you'll excuse me, sir," he said, "I guess I'll hail that bobby hutch and go the round."

The King laughed.

"You are a man of business, Mr. Van Decht," he said. "Certainly, go and help yourself to all the information you can. Sara, if you will come up with me I will show you the palace. I am afraid there is nothing there to interest your father, but he will have many opportunities of seeing it. Reist, will you see if the carriage has come?"

For a moment they were alone.

They looked into one another's eyes, and Sara laughed softly.

"Why, this is just the queerest thing in the world," she murmured. "What will happen to me at the palace if I forget to say 'your Majesty,' and ought I to curtsey when I speak to you?"

Ughtred smiled back at her.

"I believe," he said, "that you ought to kiss—my hand."

"Then I guess I won't," she answered. "I believe I'm democrat enough to expect ——"

"What?"

He leaned over towards her, but the sentence was never finished. Reist stood before them, and the look on his face was a forecast of coming trouble.

"The carriage is here, your Majesty!" he announced.

CHAPTER XXIII

"WHAT do I think of Theos?" Sara repeated. "I think it must be the lost paradise of the lotus-eaters. It does not seem possible for anything ever to happen here."

Ughtred laughed.

"We share the primitive passions with the rest of mankind," he assured her. "We know what it is to be excited, even to be rowdy. The wear and tear of life perhaps touches us more lightly than in your Western cities. You see we are a rural people."

"Miss Van Decht," Reist remarked dryly, "misses perhaps the clang of the electric cars and the factory sirens."

"It is the proverbial peace of the city amongst the mountains," Ughtred said. "Yet if you listen you can hear the murmur of voices in the *cafés*, and there is a band playing in the square."

"It is all—delightful," Sara declared. "Only I wonder that you find it possible to take life seriously here."

They were sitting out on the great stone balcony behind the palace—Ughtred, Reist, and Marie, Mr. Van Decht and Sara. A servant in spotless white livery had silently arranged coffee and liqueur in strange-looking bottles upon a table already laden with fruit. Below them were the terraced lawns leading to the river, dotted

with dark fir-trees and flowering shrubs—beyond the red roofs and white fronts of many villas, in the distance the blue mountains. The King and Sara Van Decht were sitting side by side. Marie, unusually taciturn, leaned back in her chair, listening and watching with half-closed eyes.

Ughtred lit a fresh cigarette, and smoked for a moment thoughtfully.

"I can assure you," he said, "that life is, in its way, as complex a thing here as in the greater cities. The people are very poor, and how to raise money enough to develop the country and pay our way without undue taxation is a very serious problem indeed. Then you must not forget that we live always in the shadow of a great danger."

Sara looked at him inquiringly. He pointed southwards to the mountains.

"Beyond there," he said, "is Turkey, and Turkey is our eternal enemy. Even now there are strained relations between us. Night and day our watchmen guard the passes. There have been rumours lately of an impending raid upon our frontier villages."

Sara listened with rapt attention.

"How fascinating. It really sounds quite mediæval."

"We are mediæval in more ways than one," he continued. "Our standing army consists of barely one thousand men, but in case of war the whole of our male population would take up arms. Every man must fight himself for his home and his native land. If you can spare the time here we will go to some of the more dis-

tant villages, and you will see the Saturday drill. I am rather proud of my military system."

She looked across at her father.

"He is so restless," she said. "I can never tell how long he will stand any one place. Just at present he talks as though he were disposed to settle down here for the rest of his life."

Marie leaned foward. Her face gleamed pale in the twilight, her tone was almost openly contemptuous.

"Away from the electric cars, and sirens, and all the delights of your Western cities?"

Sara nodded gravely.

"Yes! Away even from the Paris edition of the *New York Herald*. But then, my father, you know, is terribly mercenary. I believe he thinks that there is scope for the capitalist here."

"Your father is quite right then," Ughtred answered, smiling. "Try and persuade him to give the place a trial. It is supposed, you know, to be the healthiest spot in Europe."

"Why, I'm in no hurry to leave, and that's a fact," Mr. Van Decht admitted. "I've an appointment with the manager of your cars here to-morrow, and if we do business I guess I'll have to stop."

Sara laughed softly.

"That's just like father!" she exclaimed. "Wherever he goes and finds horse-cars he wants to either buy the company out or put in his own system of electric cars. I'm afraid you think we're very commercial, don't you, Countess?"

"Oh, no," Marie answered, coldly. "One rather

expects that, you know, from your nation. It is very interesting. I must confess, though, that I do not wish to see electric cars in the streets of Theos."

"And why not, young lady?" Mr. Van Decht inquired.

"Because I love my old city too well to wish to see her modernized and made hideous," Marie answered. "It is scarcely a feeling with which one could expect strangers to sympathize; but there are many others besides myself who would feel the same way."

Mr. Van Decht nodded.

"Is that so? Well, nowadays the countries who place the picturesque before the useful are very few and far between. I guess it's as well for the community at large that it is so. You would scarcely call that broken-down old omnibus, dragged along by a lame mule, a credit to Theos or a particularly picturesque survival."

Marie shrugged her shoulders, and dismissed the subject with a little gesture of contempt. Mr. Van Decht waited for a minute, and then, as she remained silent, continued —

"A country which neglects the laws of progress is not a country which can ever hope for prosperity. Don't you agree with me, sir?" he asked the King.

Ughtred nodded.

"I am afraid that I do," he admitted. "Theos, with its vineyards and hand-ploughs, its simple hill-folk and its quaint village towns, is, from an artistic point of view, delightful. Yet I am bound to admit that for the sake of its children and the unborn generations, I would

rather see factory chimneys in its valleys and mine shafts in the hills. The people are poor, and so long as we have to import everything we use and wear, we must get poorer and poorer. The country is productive enough. We have minerals and a wonderful soil. What we need is capital and enterprise."

Marie shuddered.

"And you are a Tyrnaus!" she murmured, with a sidelong glance of reproach.

"It is my fortune," he said, "good or bad, to know more of the world outside than those who came before me. Please God, I am going to leave Theos a richer and happier country when my days here are spent. If we are spared from war I shall do it."

"In future," Marie said, "I shall dread war less. I begin to see that there are other evil things."

She rose and bowed slightly to the King.

"Your Majesty will excuse me," she said. "I find the air a little cold."

She passed down the terrace steps, her maid a few yards behind. A certain reserve fell upon the others.

"I am afraid," Sara said to Nicholas of Reist, "that your sister does not approve of me."

He hesitated.

"Marie," he said, "is passionately faithful to all the traditions of our family and our race. This is a conservative country, and no one more so than she. I myself am in close sympathy with her. Yet my reason tells me that we are both wrong. Our peasantry are finding already the struggle for existence a severe one—a single failure in the crops would mean a famine. It

has occurred to me, Mr. Van Decht, that the advice of a man of affairs such as yourself may be very useful to us."

Ughtred rose up.

"You shall talk progress together," he said, "while I show Miss Van Decht my pictures."

* * * * * *

Marie held the note in her fingers, looking at it doubtfully. It was addressed to her, thrust secretly into her maid's hand by a stranger in the crush outside the palace gates. At least that was the girl's story. She tore it open.

"You are a patriot, the sister of Nicholas of Reist, and the King's friend. By you he may be warned. The American woman who with her father has come to Theos, was betrothed to him in London. She has come to claim her position. The people of Theos will never accept as their queen a woman of humble birth, the child of tradespeople. Let the King be warned."

She tore the note into a thousand pieces, and walked restlessly up and down the great room. Her eyes were lit with fire, and a scarlet spot burned in her cheeks.

"Oh, if he should dare," she murmured. "If he should dare!"

She stopped abruptly before the picture of Rudolph. The flickering light of fifty wax candles from the huge silver candelabra on the oaken table lit up the dull canvas. It was Ughtred himself who looked down at her.

"Queen of Theos!" she murmured. "Why not? We have drunk together from the King's cup."

"Countess!"

She turned quickly round. Brand had come silently into the room.

CHAPTER XXIV

"You!"

Her surprised interjection recalled to him for the first time the hour and the strangeness of his visit. Yet he attempted little in the way of excuse.

"I may stay five minutes," he begged. "You are alone?"

"It is very late," she murmured.

He pointed out of the great window at the far end of the room.

"Your brother is attending the King. If he should return—well, mine is no idle errand. I can justify my coming, even at this hour."

Then she noticed that he was not dressed for the evening, that he was pale, and that there was trouble in his eyes. She led him into a smaller room, pushed open a window, and beckoned him to follow her down the worn grey steps into the gardens.

"This is my favourite corner," she said. "Beyond are the flower gardens, and the air here at night is always sweet. You shall sit with me, my friend, and you shall tell me what it is that brings you with this look of trouble in your face."

His eyes remained fixed upon her with a sudden passionate wistfulness. She was very sweet and gracious, and her slow speech seemed to him more musical than ever. So he sat by her side, and a little sea of white

satin and lace and soft draperies covered up all the space between them, for it had been a State dinner at the palace, and he found speech very difficult.

"Now this is restful and very pleasant," she said, after a long pause. "But you must tell me why you have come. It was not by chance—to see me? But no? You spoke also of my brother."

Her eyes sought his—a spice of coquetry in their questioning gleam. But the cloud lingered upon his face.

"I would not have dared to come at such an hour," he said, "if my visit were an ordinary one."

"How very unenterprising," she murmured. "I am sure that this is much the pleasantest time of the day."

"Countess," he said, slowly, "is Baron Domiloff a friend of yours?"

"Of mine? But no. Why do you ask such a question?"

"He has been banished from Theos. Did you know that he was hiding still in the city?"

She shook her head slowly.

"I know nothing," she answered. "How strange that you should ask me."

"Is it not true, then," he continued, "that you and he and your brother are plotting against the King?"

She regarded him with uplifted eyebrows. Then she patted him gently on the arm with her fan.

"It is the moon, my friend," she declared. "A little brief frenzy, is it not?"

His tone recovered confidence. He breathed a sigh of relief.

"The man lied to me," he declared. "Now I will tell you just what has happened to me. You know that I have a room in the Theba Place. Well, to-night, as I was about to prepare for dinner, a messenger, a native Thetian he seemed to me, brought a note to my rooms. It was neither signed nor addressed. But it bade me follow the bearer without question if I would be of service to Theos."

"You went?" she asked.

"Of course," he answered, quickly. "If the summons was genuine, well and good—if it was false, I still wanted to know the meaning of it."

"And which was it?" she asked.

"Genuine enough," he answered, gravely. "I was led into a quarter of Theos where I have never been before, and which I am sure I could not find again. We arrived at a little *café*—I do not know the name—it was somewhere outside the walls. A man was waiting for me in a back room. He was disguised, but I recognized him at once. It was Domiloff!"

She started. Instinctively he felt that she was deeply interested.

"At first I thought that it was a trap—that Domiloff was preparing some revenge for my personation of the King. Soon, however, I learnt that his intention was a different one. He is concerned in a plot to dethrone the King, and he proposed that I should throw in my lot with his party."

"Did he tell you, then, that Nicholas and I were concerned in it?"

"No. From his point of view your cooperation as

yet was unnecessary. Yet the whole thing is concerned with you and your brother, for Domiloff has named him as the future ruler of Theos. He offered to give me positive evidence that Russia has decided to remove Ughtred from the throne, that Theos itself is in deadly peril."

"There is one thing," she said, "which I do not quite understand. Why did Domiloff send for you? You are not a soldier, nor are you well-known to the Thetians."

"It is very simple," he answered. "To-day the Press has an immense influence upon public opinion in England and all the Western countries. I am writing for my paper in England a series of articles upon Theos, and I am writing from a point of view friendly to Ughtred of Tyrnaus. Domiloff wants these articles stopped. He professes to need my active help. What he really desires is that I write no more, or alter the tone of my letters."

Her satin slipper traced a mystic pattern upon the smooth green turf.

"These are two things," she said, "which I do not understand. The Baron Domiloff has repute as a cunning and very shrewd diplomatist. Did he ask you for no pledge that you would not speak of these things to the King?"

Brand shook his head.

"It would have been useless," he answered. "I think that he knew quite well that I should give no such pledge. That is what makes me believe that the matter is serious. He is so sure of coming events that failing

my joining with him he expressed himself as indifferent as to what my course of action might be. There was only one condition he made before I left—and that one I agreed to."

She looked at him inquiringly.

"It was that I should come to you—before I went to the King."

Their eyes met. In that single luminous moment he learned that these things came at least as no surprise to her. He seemed even to divine something of that desire which had eaten its way into her heart.

"To me!" she murmured. "Well?"

"Countess," he said, gravely, "for myself there is but one course of action possible. I came here as the friend of Ughtred of Tyrnaus. I am bound to his cause by every tie of honour, as well as my own sympathies. Before the morning I shall have told him all that I have told you."

Her fan fluttered idly in her fingers. She remained silent, but he had a fancy that a shadow had fallen between them.

"Domiloff sent me to you," he continued. "What does that mean?"

She shook her head.

"The ways of Baron Domiloff," she said, "are not easy to understand."

"Are you and your brother concerned in this—plot?" he asked, gravely.

"My brother," she said, "would, I believe, shoot you if you asked him such a question. It is only a few months ago that he himself brought Ughtred of Tyrnaus

here. Nicholas has too little ambition. He is a patriot, pure and simple."

"And you—yourself?" he asked.

"I have had no dealings with Baron Domiloff," she answered, "but I think that he knows my views. I do not love the family of Tyrnaus, and I do not think that Ughtred had any claim to the throne of Theos. His father and grandfather misgoverned the country, and estranged all the nobility, who were the backbone of the State. We alone are left, and if Ughtred should marry the daughter of this American tradesman we, too, must become exiles."

"But you would not stoop," he murmured, "to plot against the King?"

"It is not necessary," she answered. "I believe that what you have been told is true. I believe that Russia will not tolerate Ughtred of Tyrnaus. My friend," she added, in a softer tone, "why do you concern yourself in these things? Leave Domiloff alone, and, believe me, your warning to the King would be wasted. Stay here, and watch for the things which may happen. Do you remember what we talked about that night at the palace? The times are coming—wait, and your opportunity may also show itself. Who knows that your own future may not become linked with the future of Theos?"

She leaned over towards him, her hand fell upon his shoulder, and its touch, though light, was like a caress. Then Brand understood that this was temptation, for his whole being quivered with the delight of her softened tone, and the unspoken things which trembled

there and shone from her eyes. In truth, she, too, was thinking of the moment when she had believed him to be the King.

"Dear lady," he said, almost pleadingly, "I would be content to live all my days in Theos if ——"

He hesitated. A wonderful smile curved her lips, and her eyes were full of invitation. Yet he hesitated.

"For a brave man," she murmured, "you are very —very faint-hearted."

Whereupon he took her into his arms, and kissed her.

CHAPTER XXV

It chanced that a brilliant autumn brought a season of great prosperity to the Thetian wine-growers and farmers, and the year of Ughtred's accession to the throne seemed likely to be marked with a white stone in their annals. Never had a ruler been more popular with all classes. His military system, while it made no undue demands upon the people, provoked the admiration of Europe, and several important and successful industrial undertakings were due entirely to his instigation. Mr. Van Decht, fascinated by the climate, the primitive but delightful life, and a firm believer in the possibilities of the country, still lingered in the capital, and already the results of his large investments were beginning to be felt. Only a few people knew of the hidden danger which was ever brooding over the land—a danger which Ughtred had realized from the first, and which from the first he had set himself steadfastly to avert. A soldier himself, he knew something of the horrors of war. Nothing seemed to him more awful than the vision of this beautiful country blackened and devastated, her corn-fields soaked with blood, her pleasant pastoral life swept away in the grim struggle against an only partially-civilized enemy. He set himself passionately to work to strive for peace.

Reist came to him one evening straight from the House of Laws with a suggestion.

"Your Majesty," he said, "the people are asking for a queen."

Ughtred laughed.

"I'm sorry I can't oblige them off-hand," he answered.

"Has your Majesty never thought of an alliance through marriage with one of the Powers? Not a direct alliance, perhaps, but one which might be useful to us if the worst should come."

Ughtred shook his head.

"A dream, my friend," he answered. "There is only one country in the world who could help us, and I fear an English princess would be beyond our wildest dreams. Friendship with Russia is more to be dreaded than her open enmity. France has no royal family, and is bound up with Russia. Germany and Austria are tied."

"Your marriage has been spoken of, sire," Reist said slowly. "I have promised to convey to the House your views. A queen would be very popular."

"I am not prepared at present to make any announcement upon the subject," Ughtred answered.

"I should not hesitate at any sacrifice which the safety or benefit of Theos seemed to require. At present there is no question of anything of the sort."

Reist bowed, and abandoned the subject. But late that night he sought his sister. She was sitting on the stone balcony which led from her own suite of rooms, her elbow upon the worn balustrade, her clear, beautiful face clouded with thought. For the first time Nicholas noticed a change in her. She was thinner, and there

were dark lines under her eyes. A vague trouble was in her eyes.

"Marie," he said, "you have not been to the palace lately."

"No."

"Tell me why."

She turned slowly towards him.

"Need you ask! I hate that American girl. She is always there. She monopolizes everything. I wish to Heaven that she would go away."

Reist came a little closer. His voice dropped.

"Has he spoken?"

"You know that he has not."

The face of the man was stern and grey—even as the face of one musing upon evil things.

"To-night," he said, "I gave him every opportunity. By all ancient laws and customs he is your betrothed—and he knows it. Yet he persists in this uncompromising silence. The difficulty remains only with himself."

She drew nearer to him.

"It is an insult to our house," she murmured. "I am glad that you have spoken to me of this, Nicholas. It is unbearable!"

"You are right," he admitted. "You have been patient, Marie, and so have I. The time has come to end it."

She laid her slender fingers upon his arm. Slenderer than ever they seemed to him now, and unbejewelled save for one great emerald set in dull gold which burned upon her fourth finger.

"What can you do, Nicholas? You know the meaning of it all. It is the coming of Sara Van Decht."

He nodded thoughtfully.

"I myself," he said, "have watched—and seen. But, Marie, the daughter of a tradesman, though he were rich enough to buy a kingdom, can never sit upon the throne of Theos."

"He is masterful," she said, "and I think that he cares for her. He will have his own way."

Reist was wearing his uniform, for there had been a reception at the Austrian Minister's. As though by accident he touched the hilt of his sword.

"Our honour is engaged, Marie," he said. "You may safely leave all in my hands."

"He is your King!" she reminded him, with a sidelong glance, as though anxious to watch the effect of her words.

"And I," he answered, hotly, "am Nicholas, Duke of Reist. Since when, Marie, have the men of Tyrnaus reached a pinnacle when the Reists could not address them as equals? Our quarterings are more numerous, our House is more ancient than theirs. Ughtred of Tyrnaus must answer to me as would any other gentleman of his rank if the time should come when our honour demands it."

"Those are brave words, my brother!" she said.

"You do not doubt me, Marie?"

She shook her head.

"I do not doubt you, Nicholas, only ——"

"Well?"

"There was a time when the throne was yours, when

the people would have shouted you King. You let it go by. You pointed there! Tell me, Nicholas, is it forever this waiting?"

Her forefinger was raised to that carved motto. Nicholas remained for a moment lost in thought.

"Marie," he said, presently. "I will tell you the truth. I did not give Ughtred of Tyrnaus credit for such gifts as he has shown. I wanted the principle of monarchy reestablished, and it was best to revert to the royal house. Then I found that he was a better man than I had thought, and an alliance with you would have reconciled me to his reign. Now—I must admit—I am doubtful."

She remained for a moment lost in thought. Had the time come when she might speak? He detested Domiloff and all his ways—at heart, too, the good of Theos was far dearer to him than any personal ambition."

"Nicholas, you say that you are doubtful. I have a feeling that before long the King will announce his intention of marrying Sara Van Decht. Will you remain even then his faithful servant?"

The scorn in her tone first stung, then moved him to wonder.

"You do not love the King, Marie!" he exclaimed.

"Love him! Nicholas, it is better that there should be now a clear understanding of things between us. I am a Countess of Reist, and I have been slighted by an adventurer—a man who but for you would even now have been living in poverty in a foreign land. I would not marry him though he begged me with tears in his eyes, to save his throne, to save his life."

He walked restlessly up and down. His own pride had been wounded bitterly. Marie was right.

"I am willing," she continued, "to endure this affront if it seems to you that your duty to Theos still bids you hold by the King! But there is one thing to which I will not submit. I will not bow the knee to this American girl if he should make her Queen. Nor in that case will I suffer you, Nicholas, to remain the King's counsellor."

"Nor will I!" he answered.

"Promise me one thing more, my brother!" she begged. "If again we should hear that cry ringing through the squares, promise me that you will not fail them. We have had enough of strangers in Theos. It is those who have lived here all their lives, to whom every stone of the place is dear, who should control her destinies."

"I am the faithful servant of Ughtred of Tyrnaus," he answered, slowly, "while he serves the State wisely and well. But if that should come to pass which we have spoken of, the evil must fall upon his own head. Listen!"

There was some commotion without. A servant threw open the door.

"His Majesty the King!"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE King followed hard upon the footsteps of his seneschal, and neither Reist nor Marie was wholly at ease in the first moments of greeting. It was the latter to whom the King addressed himself.

"My visit, Countess," he said, "is to you. I am fortunate in finding you at home."

"Your Majesty is very kind!" Marie answered.

"I have come," he continued, "to demand an explanation from you—or rather to beg for it. You have been absent from all our gatherings at the palace lately. I came to assure myself that we had not unwittingly offended you, or to ask you how we can render them sufficiently attractive to insure your presence."

Marie was taken unawares both by the King's visit and by the directness of his questioning. It was Nicholas who answered for her.

"Your Majesty," he said, "my sister does not enjoy the best of health. I was even now endeavouring to persuade her to spend a few weeks at the castle. The mountain air is always good for her."

"Your sister's appearance, then," the King replied, "much belies her condition. I have never seen her looking better."

"Nevertheless, my brother is right, your Majesty," Marie said. "I have decided to leave Theos for a while."

The King bowed.

"It is not amongst my prerogatives to question the movements of my subjects," he said, gravely, "but you must forgive me if I remember that you and your brother are my earliest and best friends here. I shall venture to ask you therefore if ill-health is your only reason for desiring to absent yourself from the Court?"

Nicholas intervened. He rose and held back the curtains which led into another suite of rooms. Marie understood, and with a quick courtesy rose from her seat.

"Your Majesty," Nicholas said, "with your permission I will return your candour. The subject is one which we can best discuss in my sister's absence."

Marie passed out. Nicholas let fall the curtains.

"Your Majesty," he said, "only a short while ago, as your counsellor, and as one who has the interests of Theos greatly at heart, I ventured to allude to a somewhat delicate subject—to your marriage."

The King nodded.

"Well?"

"I must take the liberty of reminding your Majesty of your first visit here on your arrival at Theos. We drank wine together in this room, the Royal betrothal cup was filled for you, and notwithstanding my remonstrances, at your particular desire my sister drank with you from that cup. Its history and associations were known to you."

The King rose up.

"But ——"

"Your Majesty will permit me," Reist interrupted.

"It was doubtless an act of thoughtless good-nature on your part, but we Thetians hold fast by our old traditions, and regard them as sacred things. The news of this leaked out, and the marriage of your Majesty and the Countess of Reist has been freely talked of throughout the State. Your Majesty will perceive, therefore, that my sister's position at Court naturally became a trying one, especially as her rank entitles her always to the place by your side."

Ughtred was silent for several moments. A frown of perplexity spread itself over his face.

"Reist," he said slowly, "your sister is very charming, and I have a great admiration for her. Yet I must admit this. The idea which you have suggested is an altogether new one to me. I did not, for one moment, imagine that she or you or any one would attach any significance to what I looked upon at the time as a harmless little ceremony."

Reist bowed low.

"To the people of Theos," he said, "these ancient customs are sacred. Your Majesty will permit me to proceed. There is a further development which has also a bearing upon the situation. I refer to the advent of Mr. and Miss Van Decht."

The King raised his eyebrows.

"And how does this matter concern," he asked, "my very good friends, the Van Dechts?"

"Your Majesty," Nicholas answered, "has admitted them, considering their position, or I should say their lack of position, to a somewhat surprising familiarity. This too has given rise to much comment in the city.

Miss Van Decht is a very beautiful young woman, and your Majesty has treated her publicly with great consideration, almost as an equal. Your Majesty must bear with our prejudices. This is not a democratic country. We hold by our rank and its obligations, and we do not consider an American retired tradesman and his daughter people whom we can meet habitually on terms of equality —even at the Court of the King."

Ughtred rose from his chair, and his mouth was set and grim.

"I am obliged to you for your frankness, Nicholas," he said. "I will endeavour to return it. Mr. Van Decht and his daughter are my very good friends, and their position at my Court is that of valued and welcome associates. It seems to me that whom the King can treat as equals his nobles may endure as companions. But in any case I desire to say this to you and to the aristocracy of Theos, whose opinions you doubtless express. In the matter of my friends, as in the matter of taking a wife when the time may come, I do not permit any interference, and if any be offered I shall resent it. Further, if any stay away from my Court for such reasons as you have hinted at I shall esteem their absence a personal affront. Am I understood?"

Reist bowed in cold silence. The King took a quick step towards him and laid his hand upon his arm.

"Nicholas," he said, "don't let me lose a good friend —you to whom I owe my kingdom. Remember that I am a man as well as a King. I did not promise to become a machine when I took the coronation oaths. I

have my likes and my dislikes—as you have. Bear with me a little."

Reist hesitated. There entered a messenger for the King.

"Your Majesty," he announced, "the Englishman Brand, is at the palace. He desires an immediate audience."

Ughtred took up his cloak.

"I fear that it is ill news," he said. "Follow me, Reist."

CHAPTER XXVII

"Your Majesty ——"

The King waved his hand.

"You can leave that out, Brand. Speak to me plainly. You look as though you had something important to say."

"I have indeed!" Brand answered.

He glanced around cautiously. They were in the chamber used for meetings of the Privy Council—a great room with stained glass windows, fluted pillars supporting a vaulted roof, stone walls, with here and there a covering of tapestry. A collection of ancient arms was hung over the great chimneypiece. In the centre of the floor stood a round table of solid oak. A bad room for confidences this, in which the slightest whisper awoke curious echoes. The King noticed Brand's hesitation, and divined its cause.

"Come this way, Brand," he directed. "Reist is close behind. He will keep out all intruders."

They passed into the King's private study, a small octagonal room on the ground floor of one of the towers. The King threw himself into an easy chair, and pointed towards another, but Brand remained standing.

"Well?"

"Your Majesty, the kingdom of Theos is in danger!"

"I know it," the King answered, calmly. "There are

traitors in the city itself. I have felt sure of it for some time."

"The danger is urgent!"

"Go on."

"I have acquired a good deal of information during the last few days," Brand said. "Some of it has come through a source which I may not reveal—piecemeal, and in disconnected fragments. You will have to take a good deal on trust."

"I believe in you, Brand."

"First of all, then," Brand said, "you are aware of what has been going on in the Press all over Europe, in Russia, Germany, and France?"

The King nodded.

"A widespread conspiracy," he said, "to vilify me and my methods and my government. I have been represented to Europe as a harebrained, scheming, military adventurer, idle, worthless, a drunkard, and heaps of other things. I know it, Brand. I know another thing, too. I know that one paper in England, through thick and thin, has been my friend. I do not deserve all the good which it has spoken of me. On the other hand, I shall always regard as one of my best friends the man who had the pluck to try and stem the tide."

The slender fingers of the journalist found themselves suddenly within the brown, sinewy hand of the King. There was an instant's silence—a man's silence. Then Brand continued —

"Mr. Ellis, our Minister there, is your friend, but he is a weak, colourless creature, and he gives no weight or point to his reports. He tries hard to be honest, but he

is wofully under the influence of the others. And the others ——"

"I know," the King interrupted. "Austria, Germany, and Russia have come to a secret understanding, and somehow I fancy that Turkey is involved in it. But what pretext they can find for movement against me, or from what quarter I am to expect the aggression I cannot say."

"It is what I have just discovered," Brand said.

The King's eyes flashed. He was a brave man, but the cloud of doubt had been stupefying. It was this knowledge for which he craved.

"It is Russia who is the moving spirit," Brand continued.

"Russia, of course," the King exclaimed, bitterly. "An independent Theos has always been against her policy. She debauched the Republic, she tried—as you well know, Brand—to make my accession a virtual Russian protectorate."

"And, further," Brand said, "she has actually in London stooped to this. Our paper has been approached by an agent of the Russian government with a view to purchasing a cessation of our support of you. I myself, your Majesty, feel myself deeply to blame. Weeks ago I could have warned you that Domiloff was still in the capital plotting against you. I kept silent. I beg that you will not ask me why. The news which has brought me here now has come by cipher telegram from my chief. A secret treaty has been signed between Russia and Turkey. The terms I do not know, but Turkey is left free to attack you at once, and she is already moving troops and guns to the frontier."

"Germany?" Ughtred asked, quickly.

"Is pledged to neutrality—also Austria. The only European country which has not come to terms with Russia is England."

The King rose from his chair, and walked restlessly up and down the room. His eyes were flashing, and the lines about his mouth were hard and bitter.

"It's a brave game—politics," he cried. "To-day we read our ancient history, and thank the gods for civilization. It's a huge fraud, Brand. What they did in those days with fire and the sword they do to-day by craft and secret treaties, by falsehood and deceit. It's a world of rapine still. It is only the methods which have changed—and changed for the worse."

Brand nodded slowly.

"Listen," he said. "My chief has had an interview with one of our Cabinet Ministers. He has listened to all he had to say, and I believe that the state of affairs here will be fairly represented to the English Government. But, to be frank, I am afraid there will be no intervention from England. She may sympathize, but she will not deem her interests sufficiently involved to interfere."

"Have you any idea," Ughtred asked, "when there will be any movement on the part of Turkey, and what the *casus belli* will be?"

"The blow may be struck at any moment," Brand answered. "I am afraid my warning comes too late to afford you time for preparations."

The King smiled.

"I am not a child, my dear Brand," he said. "Sooner

or later I felt that the thing must come, and instinct seemed to tell me from what quarter. I will let you into a secret, my friend. If the Turks raid my three frontier villages they may possibly find themselves a little surprised."

A smile illumined Brand's serious face.

"You'll make a fight for it, then?" he asked, eagerly.

Ughtred rose up. His eyes were lit with inward fire, and in his tone there trembled a note of splendid passion.

"A fight for it! Ay, we shall fight in such a way, my friend, that all Europe shall hide her face, and feel the shame of the carnage and misery for which her miserable selfishness is responsible. There is one thing about my people, Brand, which is divine, and, thank God, it is in my own blood, too, notwithstanding my years of exile. We love our country, our hills and mountains, our corn-fields and vineyards, our villages and our queer old towns. It's a wonderful love, Brand, and I don't believe you highly-civilized people in your rich, smoke-stained Western countries know what it means. I tell you it's a passion here. We Thetians love our country as we love our womenkind. The footstep of the invader is seduction—when it comes there will be lit such a fire of passionate hate from the Balkans to the northern frontier that only death or victory will quench. You will see them come to arms, Brand, these children of mine, whom God protect, young and old, boys and their grandfathers! A fight for it, did you say? I promise you, man, that if this blow falls, and we are conquered, you shall come here afterwards, and you shall find an empty country, a blackened chaos of ruins."

An answering flash of enthusiasm lit up Brand's face for a moment. But the man was practical to the core.

"What number of trained men can you rely upon?" he asked.

"Fifteen thousand," the King answered. "I know every village company. Every regiment I have drilled myself. They have old Martinis, but they are born shots, and born horsemen. Lately, too, we have gone through a course of carbine instruction. I could put five thousand mounted infantry into the field who could surprise you."

"And artillery?"

The King groaned.

"We have done what we could," he answered, "but as for heavy guns, we have none. Listen, I will give you a sketch of my idea for defending the Balkans."

The King talked quickly and clearly. There was no more trace of the enthusiast, nor, indeed, did he betray again during all the anxious days to come that more passionate side of the man which Brand's few words seemed to have quickened into life. He talked now as the cool and skilful strategist. Brand, who was something of an amateur soldier himself, listened with keen interest.

"And you?" the King asked at last.

Brand smiled.

"I am here to see that the things which are coming are fairly reported from one quarter, at least," he answered. "I am going to stay, and if the trouble comes I am correspondent for the *New York Herald*, as well as the *Daily Courier*."

"That is very good news," the King said. "England and America are the champions of freedom throughout the world. I have fought for England, and if this wrong is done to me I shall appeal to her for justice."

A knock at the door. A young officer on the King's staff saluted.

"His Excellency the Turkish Ambassador craves the privilege of an immediate audience," he announced.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Effenden Pascha was breathless, and for such a phlegmatic individual seemed to be much disturbed.

"Your Majesty," he said, "I am here on a serious errand."

The King bowed.

"Proceed, Effenden Pascha."

"Your Majesty has heard the news from Bekal?"

Ughtred shook his head.

"I have heard nothing!"

The Turk raised his hands. It was incredible!

"Yesterday," he announced, "a party of my Turks riding harmlessly along the frontier were attacked without warning by a large company of mounted Thetians, and cut to pieces."

"It is amazing," the King declared. "Was no provocation given? Were the Turks unarmed?"

Effenden Pascha was clear on both points. They were simply a party of surveyors accompanied by a few soldiers. They were set upon without the slightest warning.

"It is strange," the King remarked, "that I should have heard nothing of this. It is stranger still, Effenden Pascha, that in my own capital you should first have received tidings of such gravity."

The yellow-skinned Turk did not flinch. He bore the thrust without the least sign of disquietude.

"I myself," he announced, "heard only by telegrams from Bekal ten minutes ago. One of the survivors galloped post-haste thither immediately after the affair. I have hastened to present the demands of my master the Sultan."

"You lose no time," Ughtred remarked, quietly.

The Turk shrugged his shoulders.

"The affair is of great importance," he said. "My master will demand the execution of capital punishment upon all the leaders, and an indemnity of ten million piastres."

"Your august master," Ughtred remarked, "has lost no time in formulating his demands. My reply to you is this. Immediately I learn the details of the affair I will consider your proposal."

The Ambassador, who had remained standing, bowed.

"That is to say," he remarked, softly, "that at present you decline to offer me my satisfaction or to discuss the matter with me."

"Exactly," Ughtred answered. "If the affair turns out according to your telegram I shall at once offer to you my profound regrets, and such reparation as is within my power. I will communicate with you directly I hear."

The Ambassador bowed once more, and there was a steely glint in his eyes.

"I fear," he said, "that the delay will not be pleasing to my august master!"

"It is unavoidable," the King answered. "You agree with me, Brand?"

Brand, who had been sitting in the alcove before a

writing-table hidden by a curtain, looked out and assented gravely.

"Most certainly, your Majesty."

The Turk started. His eyes flashed.

"So!" he exclaimed. "We have been overheard."

"Mr. Brand is an Englishman of distinction," the King said, softly. "I have appointed him for the present my private secretary. All affairs of State, therefore, are known to him."

The Turk bowed low. It was no fool, after all, then, with whom he had to do. He went out thoughtfully. The presence of the Englishman had impressed him. In the council room he passed the Duke of Reist hurrying through to the presence of the King.

"Effenden Pascha," he said, "will you wait for a moment. A dispatch has arrived concerning which the King will desire to see you at once."

Effenden Pascha smiled, and took a chair in the anteroom beyond. He smoked a cigarette thoughtfully, and drank the coffee which a groom of the chambers hastened to bring him. In ten minutes Reist reappeared.

"Will you come with me?" he said.

Effenden Pascha threw down his cigarette, and followed.

The King had moved into the Council Chamber, and sat at the table with an open telegraph dispatch before him. Baron Doxis, the President of the House of Laws, was on one side of him, and Brand on the other. Effenden Pascha knew very well what was coming. The King looked at him, and there was an added sense of power in the grave, soldierly face.

"Effenden Pascha, we too have received a telegram from Bekal. Its contents are briefly these. Bekal, an unfortified village of Theos, was last night attacked by a large armed body of Turks, who proceeded to rob, murder, and outrage in the most barbarous fashion. My regard, however, for the safety of my frontier towns has led me lately to station bodies of mounted troops within signalling distance of Bekal, and my dispatch informs me that in the fight which followed your troops were driven across the frontier with heavy losses. You will see, Effenden Pascha, that my report and yours differ."

The Turk smiled incredulously. The reports most certainly did differ.

"Now," the King continued, "if your report is the true one, I will hold myself responsible for all the evil that has been done. If, on the other hand, mine is true, I shall at once formulate demands which I shall request you to lay before your august master. Now, I invite you, in order that the truth may be placed beyond doubt, to accompany an envoy from this court to Bekal by special train to-day, and there agree as to what has really happened."

Effenden Pascha shrugged his shoulders.

"I must await the instructions of my master, your Majesty," he answered, calmly.

"You decline his Majesty's proposal, then?" Reist asked quietly.

The Turk was silent. The meddlesome Englishman's pen was in the ink. His presence was disastrous.

"I do not decline—no," he answered. "I await

only a dispatch from Constantinople. I fear that your intelligence department is at fault. There has been no foray on the part of the Turks. My master desires peace above all things."

Ughtred smiled.

"You say that your master desires peace above all things," he said. "Let me see what our intelligence department has to say. Since the day of my accession to the throne you have concentrated within twenty miles of my frontier nearly thirty thousand men. Day by day this work of moving up troops has been going on. Last week trains were running all night to Bekal with war material and arms. What does this mean, Effenden Pascha?"

The Turk was dumfounded. The King's gaze was keen and close. He visibly faltered.

"Your Majesty's intelligence department has magnified a few harmless movements of troops," he said. "We have internal troubles in the northern provinces which require strong garrisons."

"But not thirty thousand men, Effenden Pascha," the King said.

The Turk bowed.

"With your permission," he said, "I will now go and lay before the Sultan, my master, your explanation of the Bekal incident."

"We shall ourselves," the King answered, "be requiring an explanation of that unprovoked attack upon our territory."

The Turk bowed and withdrew. The three men were left alone.

"The situation is fairly clear, I think," the King said. "Turkey is to be Russia's catspaw—we are to be the chestnuts. One great point is in our favour. The onus of an unprovoked invasion must rest with Turkey. Brand will see the facts correctly stated in the English and American papers. We had better send to the barracks at once, Reist, for the General, and hold a council of war."

There followed an hour's anxious consultation. Then the King, without any attendant, as was his custom, left the Palace by the side entrance, and amidst the respectful salutations of the passers by walked across to the villa which Mr. Van Decht had rented. Mr. Van Decht and Sara were sitting in the garden. He accepted the chair they offered him, and lit a cigar mechanically.

"Mr. Van Decht," he said, abruptly, "I regret exceedingly that I have encouraged you to make investments in my country. I did it for the best. It was for the advantage of my people, and I hoped for yours. I told you of the one risk. I fear that it has come to pass."

Mr. Van Decht was unmoved. Sara turned upon him breathlessly.

"Do you mean war?" she exclaimed.

He nodded.

"It seems that our great neighbours," he said, "resent our independence. Our chief enemy is Russia. In pursuance, I am convinced, of a secret understanding with her, Turkey is on the point of declaring war upon us."

"Then all I can say is that it is a darned shame," Mr. Van Decht declared, hotly. "Don't you trouble yourself about my investments. If the Turks disturb my property I guess my country will know how to make them pay. Your Majesty, those Turks must be whipped."

"While we've a yard to stand upon or a man to fight we shall do our best. I have been a soldier, as you know, all my life, and I have no sentimental hatred of war. But my country—ah well, it is so different when it is your own people who are going to die upon their homesteads, your own womenkind who must go sorrowing through life widowed and orphaned. I don't suppose there is anything particularly beautiful about Theos," the King continued, thoughtfully, "yet to me her quiet country places, her vineyards and farms, her whole rural life has seemed so simple and charming. I have seen my people at their play and at their daily tasks, a cheerful, honest people, light-hearted and fond of pleasure perhaps—why not? The thought of a blackened country, her vineyards and corn-fields red with blood, the homesteads in flames, my poor peasants fighting to the death against cruel odds—it is hideous! I do not dare to think of it or it will unman me. Only I pray to the God of our fathers that this thing will not seem just to the great liberty-loving nations and that they will not see us wiped out from the face of the earth."

There was a moment's silence. Mr. Van Decht was smoking vigorously. Sara was silent, because she did not dare to speak. But her eyes were eloquent.

Ughtred threw away his cigar which had gone out, and lit another.

"Come," he said, "I am getting an old woman. We must take the more cheerful view of things. I came to you at once, because I wanted to give you as much notice as possible."

"What do you mean?" Sara asked, softly.

"I mean that of course you must go away," Ughtred answered. "I cannot tell how long the railway communication will remain uninterrupted. Mr. Van Decht ——"

He turned round and broke off in his speech. Mr. Van Decht had disappeared. Sara and he were alone.

CHAPTER XXIX

UGHTRED was, on the whole, a man ill versed in women's ways. Yet even he was conscious of a subtle change in the girl who sat by his side. The frank friendliness of her manner towards him, which had been a constant barrier against any suggestion of more sentimental relations, was for the moment gone. Her eyes were soft and her face was eloquent with beautiful and unspoken sympathy. The change was indefinable, but apparent. Ughtred felt it, and sighed.

"This may be the last talk we shall have together for a long time," he said, gravely; "perhaps forever. I wonder if I might be permitted—to say something, which has come very near my heart lately."

"You may say anything you choose," she murmured.

"You know that lately I have been travelling about my country—trying to get to know my people and to understand them. I will tell you, Sara, what has made the greatest impression upon me. It is their beautiful domesticity. I think that it has taught me to understand a little how much fuller and sweeter life may be when one has a wife to care for, and to help one. And, Sara, I think that I too have been often lonely, and I too have needed a wife."

"Yes!"

It was no more than a whisper, but it thrilled the

man. He touched her fingers—warm and soft, they seemed almost to invite his caress.

"Sara, I have been dreaming since then, and I thought that when my people got to understand me a little more, to trust me and believe in me, I would go to them and say 'I am going to give you a Queen. Only I am a man as you are men, and I must choose as you have chosen, the one woman who has my heart.' And, Sara, there might have been difficulties, but I think that we should have smoothed them away ——"

"If!" she echoed.

"If the woman I love, Sara, cared a little for me."

It was dusk, and Ughtred scarcely knew how it happened, but she was in his arms and they were very happy. It was dusk then, but the stars were shining when the cathedral clock reminded him that his love-making must be brief.

"Dear," she murmured, "if you must go, at least remember that you have made me very happy."

"And I," he answered, cheerfully, "am afraid no longer of anything. I have become a raving optimist. I feel that if the war comes we shall sweep the Turks from the face of the earth."

She held out her hand and drew him to her.

"You will not repent?" she murmured. "You ought to marry a princess."

He kissed her on the lips.

"Every woman in the world," he answered, "is a princess to the man who loves her. You are my princess. There will never be any other!"

She walked with him towards the house.

"I ought to have been discussing your departure with Mr. Van Decht, and instead I have been discussing other things with you."

"Discussing what?"

"Your departure!"

She laughed softly.

"Do you think that we are going away?"

"You must," he answered, sadly. "Theos may be no safe place for you in forty-eight hours even."

She pressed his arm lightly.

"Dear," she said, "you are foolish. If ever I am to be anything to you and these people what would they think of me if I ran away when evil times came? But wait! You must hear what father says. He knows nothing of this."

They found him in the room he called his study. He looked up from his desk as they entered.

"Father," Sara said, "the King wants us to leave to-morrow morning. In forty-eight hours he says the city may be in danger."

Mr. Van Decht wheeled round in his recently imported American chair, and puffed vigorously at his cigar.

"I wasn't reckoning upon leaving just yet," he remarked, quietly. "Were you, Sara?"

"No!"

Ughtred looked from one to the other.

"I am afraid you don't quite understand the situation, Mr. Van Decht. I do not think it probable of course, but it is possible that the city may be surrounded in less than a week."

Mr. Van Decht nodded.

"I guess it isn't quite so bad as that," he answered. "In any case, I'd like you to understand this. We've had a pretty good time here, and we haven't any idea of scuttling out just because things aren't exactly booming. I've a tidy idea of engineering, and I think I can show you a wrinkle or two in trench-making. Then there's another thing—you'll allow a man's a right to do what he pleases with his own money?"

"Why, I suppose so," Ughtred answered.

"Well, I'm not given to bragging," Mr. Van Decht continued, "but I reckon I'm one of the richest men in the States. Accordingly, as I'm sort of a resident here I claim the right to help the war fund. I've put a million to your credit at the Credit Lyonnaise, and if more's wanted—there's plenty. I don't want any thanks; I don't mind telling you that I'd give a lot more to see those low-down skunks get the whipping they deserve."

Ughtred was for a moment speechless. It was Sara who replied for him.

"We are very much obliged, father," she said, smiling at him. "You don't mind, do you?"

He looked from one to the other. He did not affect any surprise, but his face was grave.

"Sara has promised that some day if we are spared she will be my wife," Ughtred said, simply. "I hope that you will consent."

Mr. Van Decht nodded thoughtfully.

"I had an idea," he said, hesitatingly, "that you would be not exactly a free agent in such a matter."

Ughtred smiled.

"My kingdom is a tiny one," he answered, "and I do not think after a while that there will be any difficulty at all."

Mr. Van Decht rose from his chair and shook hands solemnly with the young man.

"I wasn't reckoning upon having a King for a son-in-law," he said, "but I know a man when I see him, and if it works out to be possible you can take my consent for granted. Sara is the daughter of plain people with no family to boast of, but I tell you this, sir, I am a man with few wants, and I will give Sara the largest dowry that has ever been given by prince or commoner. I reckon I'm worth five million pounds, and I'll settle four and a half upon her. Theos wants money, and that may take things a bit smoother in case of trouble."

"You are magnificently generous, sir!" Ughtred answered. "I am afraid that nowadays a bride with such a dowry would rank above princesses."

The cathedral clock chimed again. Ughtred tore himself away. Reist met him at the door. His eyes blazing with excitement.

"Effenden Pascha has left the city!" he exclaimed. "The Turks are streaming over the frontier—Bushnieff has wired for reinforcements."

"The supply trains are waiting?" Ughtred asked, quickly.

"With steam up!"

"Your carriage quickly. To the barracks!" Ughtred exclaimed.

CHAPTER XXX

All night long the war-beacons of Theos reddened the sky and the thunder of artillery woke strange echoes amongst the mountains. There were three passes only through which the Turks could force their way into the fertile plain which stretched from Theos southwards, and each one, to their surprise, was found well guarded and fortified. A simultaneous advance was repulsed with heavy loss. At Solika only, on the far east, where the veteran General Kolashin was in command, the first position was carried, but this temporary success was counterbalanced by the immense losses inflicted on the advancing columns from the second and more secure line of fortifications. Across the plain a light railway from Theos all night long brought reinforcements and stores to the different positions. Ughtred himself, by means of an engine and fast horses, visited before daybreak the three points of attack. He was present and himself directed the successful resistance at Solika. He returned to Theos at daybreak hopeful, and even with a certain sense of relief that the worst had now come to pass.

Still in his uniform, stained with blood and dust, the King sat at a small writing-table in his retiring-room reading the day's letters and telegrams. Already he had been busy with tongue and pen. His appeal for intervention, couched in dignified and measured terms, had

been written, signed, and dispatched by special messenger to England, France, and Germany. For Ughtred had a very keen sense of proportion. Courageous though he was, and confident in the bravery of his people, he knew that his resistance unaided could only be a matter of time.

Hiram Van Decht, now a privileged person at the palace, came in to him as he sat there.

"I guess you don't want to be bothered just now," he remarked, apologetically, "but Sara's bound to know how things have gone so far."

Ughtred wheeled round in his chair and welcomed his visitor.

"Cigars at your elbow," he said. "Help yourself."

Van Decht disregarded the invitation. He looked steadily at the King. Then he rang the bell.

"You'll forgive the liberty, I know," he said, "but I'm going to tell that flunkey of yours to fetch a flask of wine, and see you drink some."

Ughtred smiled.

"I was just going to order something," he said. "I've had a hard night. So far nothing has gone amiss. Our outposts were rushed at Solika, but our main position was easily held."

Van Decht nodded.

"That's good! Any fighting at Althea Pass?"

"We are being heavily shelled there and at Morania, but I consider that both places are almost impregnable. Solika is where we must concentrate. You see we have treachery to fear there. It is a frontier town and full of small Russian traders. Reist is garrisoning the place,

and General Dartnoff is in command of the forces holding the Pass. Just now everything is quiet. I fancy they are waiting to bring up more heavy guns."

Van Decht lit a cigar meditatively.

"This is what beats me," he remarked. "I can never figure out your European politics, but I should never have thought that England and Germany would have allowed a small, unoffending country to be overrun and grabbed by a lot of heathen infidels."

Ughtred sighed.

"It is hard to understand," he said. "Only you must remember this. Selfishness is the keynote of international politics, as of many other things. A single Power is always afraid of moving for fear of disturbing the balance of nations. Besides, they all know that this is no war between Turkey and Theos. It is Russia who is pulling the strings."

"That's all right," Mr. Van Decht admitted, "but I should say that you've a sort of a claim on England. You're half an Englishman, anyway. You've fought her battles. She's big enough to give you a lift."

"If help comes from anywhere," Ughtred answered, "it will come from England. I have appealed to the Powers, and to England especially. Mr. Ellis has already been here, and he is representing my case strongly."

Wine was brought in, and food. Ughtred ate little, but smoked a cigar.

"What's the next move?" Mr. Van Decht asked.

"Well, I am waiting now for news from Reist," the King said. "We are in telegraphic communication with Solika, and I can get there on my engine in an

hour. So long as we can hold Solika we are safe, for I do not think that we can possibly be outflanked. Our whole southern frontier only extends for forty miles, and there are only two practicable passes."

"Reist anything of a soldier?" Mr. Van Decht asked after a brief silence.

"For this sort of work—excellent!" Ughtred answered.

"You trust him?"

"As myself. I never knew a man more devoted to his country. It is his religion! Why do you ask?"

Van Decht took his cigar from his mouth and regarded it thoughtfully.

"Sara doesn't like him!"

The King laughed.

"He's no lady's man."

"Sara has instinct," her father remarked. "Can't say I take to him myself. There's a kink in the man somewhere."

Ughtred smiled.

"Well, it isn't in his loyalty or his bravery," Ughtred answered. "He is my best soldier, my most capable adviser, and I owe him my kingdom."

Van Decht abandoned the subject.

"I'll get along," he said, rising. "Take my advice. Lie down a bit till your message comes along. You're looking pretty bad."

Ughtred smiled.

"The first day of war," he said, "even on a small scale, is the most wearing. Later on we shall take things more easily. Only you must remember, sir, that

it is for the liberty of an ancient kingdom we fight, not only for our own lives, but for the happiness of unborn generations. I would sooner see Theos blotted out forever from the map of Europe and the memory of man than have her exist a vassal state of Russia."

Mr. Van Decht departed in respectful silence. If tradition or sentiment appealed to him but slightly, he knew an honest man by instinct, and he was fast drifting into a very close sympathy with his future son-in-law.

There came word from Reist within the hour. Ughtred tore open the envelope and spread out the cipher-book before him.

"No signs of movement on part of enemy. Scouts report big guns being mounted on positions commanding ours. Solika restless. Have hung two spies. General Dartnoff desires council of war this afternoon."

CHAPTER XXXI

BEFORE the great high window, Marie of Reist watched the red fires flaring in the mountains and listened to the far-off booming of the guns. Behind her the room was in darkness, for she had turned out the lamps to see more clearly into the night. So when a voice at her elbow roused her she started with a sudden fear.

"Countess, you hear the war-note yonder! Listen again! Those guns are sounding the knell of the House of Tyrnaus."

She recovered herself—yet she was amazed.

"Baron Domiloff! What, are you still in Theos?"

"Still in Theos, Countess. I remain here to the end."

"But you were banished," she exclaimed.

He smiled inscrutably.

"Yes," he answered. "I was banished—by Ughtred of Tyrnaus. Still, as you see, I remain. To tell you the truth, Countess, it did not seem worth my while to go—for so short a time."

"You must be a master in the art of corruption," she remarked.

"Indeed no," he assured her. "There are a few of my country people in the city. There are also Thetians who understand that the Tyrnaus dynasty is only a passing thing."

"I am not so sure," she answered, "that I agree with you. They say that he is a skilful and gallant soldier, and we of Theos love brave men. An hour ago he rode back to the palace, his uniform stained with dust and blood, and the people cheered him like mad things. They say that he has driven the Turks back at all points."

Domiloff smiled.

"Dear lady," he said, "the successes of to-day or to-morrow are of no account. The Turks are mounting great guns in positions which must command every point where the Thetians are covering the passes. The end of it is as certain as a mathematical problem. Before a month has passed Theos must sue for peace or admit the Turks to the city."

"You are very certain."

"Warfare to-day," he answered, "can be determined on mathematical lines. Bravery is a delightful quality in the abstract, but brave men are killed as easily as cowards. Tell me, have you spoken with your brother?"

"Yes!"

"He will not consent to this Van Decht alliance?"

"No!"

Domiloff smiled.

"It is good," he answered. "I think that the time has come when I may approach him myself."

She shook her head.

"He is wild with the excitement of fighting," she said. "The King and he have fought together, and Nicholas speaks of him as a brave comrade and a

patriot. Last night he wrote to me from Solika, and he spoke of the King as a brother. For the moment he has forgotten all about the Van Decht alliance. Take my advice—leave Nicholas alone."

Domiloff looked out into the night, frowning and thoughtful.

"When the tide of battle changes," he said, "your brother's enthusiasm will wane. He will remember the slight upon you—upon his name."

She regarded him proudly.

"It is very seldom," she remarked, "that you permit me to forget it."

He smiled. The sight of his white teeth gleaming in the twilight filled her with repulsion. The man was like a wolf.

"Countess," he said, "I am not a hypocrite. I am pledged to the deposition of the King, and you are my natural ally, for it is your brother who must take his place, and you who must prevent the sacrilege of this proposed marriage. So you see I am open with you. We are both working towards the same end. Therefore I say, let us work together."

They were silent for a few minutes listening to the distant roar of the guns, watching the lurid lights which every now and then lit up with an unholy glare that distant background. Then she turned to him.

"There is nothing," she said, "which I can do. Besides, whilst the war lasts everything else seems small. To see Theos drive back the infidels and retain her freedom I would be content even to let things remain, and end my days there in the convent."

He shook his head.

"Dear lady," he said, "you were not made for a convent any more than Sara Van Decht was made for a throne. Try and believe in me a little more. I, too, desire a free Theos. You are a woman, and you have wit and courage. Say to yourself this. It is necessary for Theos that your brother and the King should quarrel. Keep it always in your mind. Remember that your brother's anger only slumbers. The King has insulted you and your House. The whole history of your family could disclose no such affront tamely borne. Besides, there is your friend—the Englishman."

She turned swiftly upon him.

"What do you mean?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Only that I know no man whose future I would believe in more readily if he were content to settle down in Theos. Your brother could see to it that it was made worth his while. Tell me—when will you see the Duke of Reist?"

"Perhaps to-night," she answered, straining her eyes through the darkness. "If all is quiet in Solika he said that he might return for a few hours."

Domiloff nodded.

"Very well! Remember what I have said to you, Countess. A rupture between your brother and the King will save Theos. You understand?"

"Yes," she answered, in a low tone. "I understand."

CHAPTER XXXII

UGHTRED sprang to his feet. He was half asleep and a little dazed—wholly bewildered at the apparition which was suddenly sharing the solitude of his chamber. It was Marie of Reist who stood before him in a wonderful rose-coloured gown tied loosely around her. She was paler than he had ever seen her—her eyes bright with purpose—behind the open panel.

"You bring news," he cried. "Do you come from Nicholas?"

She shook her head.

"I know nothing of Nicholas," she answered. "I came to see you."

He was speechless. Her visit seemed to him amazing, its object an enigma.

"I wished to speak to you alone. Lately it has been impossible. Lock your door."

He obeyed, but he returned to her with a grave face.

"Marie," he said, "think for a moment. It is better that I should come to you. To-morrow ——"

She interrupted him with an impatient gesture. At that moment the roar of distant artillery was distinctly audible.

"There may be no to-morrow," she answered. "It is for the sake of Theos I have come. You must hear me."

"For your own sake, Countess," he begged, ear-

nestly, "I beg that you will leave me. At any moment we may be interrupted. Messages are brought to me continually—and the hour is late."

"I am the Countess of Reist," she answered, proudly, "and the people of Theos know me. I have come to ask you a question. You must hear me, and you must answer me."

He smiled.

"You are a little peremptory," he said. "Never mind! The question?"

"There have been rumours, your Majesty, of a marriage between you and the American, Miss Van Decht."

He looked across at her in displeased surprise.

"These are no times for thought or speech of such things," he answered.

She turned upon him with a sudden fierceness. A spot of angry colour burned in her cheeks.

"You are wrong," she exclaimed. "I have come to you resolved to know the truth. Listen, your Majesty. There are those who say that in your long exile you have forgotten all that is due to your birth and your country. They say that you are at heart a democrat. That it is in your mind to marry this daughter of an American tradesman, to offer her to the people of Theos as their queen."

"It is true," he answered. "What of it?"

She looked at him for a moment as though stricken with a sudden blow. To her the idea was heresy, rank and foul. A storm of indignant passion swept through her.

"It is impossible," she cried, fiercely. "There is not

a lady of Theos who would attend your Court. Do you think that I—Marie of Reist, would kiss the hand of this Van Decht woman—I, or any of the others? Oh, it is madness."

"Countess," he said, quietly, "we will choose another time for the discussion of this matter. You must forgive me if I beg that you will leave me."

"Another time," she answered. "Oh, listen! You depend at this moment on the loyalty of Theos to defend your throne. Do you believe that you could command it if this were known? In the mountains the Turks are gathering a great army, in the city there is treachery. Ah, you start, but my words are true. If the words which you have spoken to me had been spoken from the balcony there your throne would have been lost forever."

He looked at her curiously—not altogether unimpressed. Treachery! What did she mean by that? She moved a step nearer to him. Underneath her loose gown her bosom rose and fell quickly. Her face was flushed and her eyes brilliant.

"Your Majesty," she said, "do you know that by all the traditions of Theos you are betrothed to me—that the people of Theos wait day by day for the announcement?"

He looked at her in blank amazement. He was bereft of words. Her eyes flashed fire upon him.

"It is an insult—this purpose of yours," she cried. "You and I have drunk together from the King's cup. It has been the betrothal ceremony in the royal House of Theos for generations. You a stranger, who owe

your very throne to us, have dared to ignore it—you, who propose to raise to the throne of the most ancient kingdom of Europe a woman of unknown birth. It is an infamy."

"Countess," he answered, "you know quite well that I was ignorant of your custom, of the history of that cup."

"There are times," she said, fiercely, "when ignorance is worse than crime. No man yet, even a king, has lived to break faith with the House of Reist."

He had recovered himself—and he remembered. He addressed her steadily, yet with a growing coldness in his tone.

"Is it your wish then, Countess, that I fulfil the obligations which you say I have incurred?"

Her face burned, her eyes were lit with fire. He had gained an advantage. He had made her angry.

"It is a brutal question," she cried, "but quickly answered. You know quite well that if it were so I should not be here. No! I would not marry you—not even to be Queen of Theos."

"Then why ——"

"Oh, but you are blind," she interrupted, passionately. "You understand nothing. I repeat that I would not marry you to be Queen of Theos. I am willing to be your friend. I am willing to forget your broken pledge. But listen! Theos is the dearest thing on earth to me. I am jealous for my country, not for myself. I will not have this tradesman's daughter Queen of Theos. Do you think that I, Marie of Reist, would follow her from the room, would bend my knee to her, would call her Queen? It is madness inconceivable. I speak for

myself, but there are others who feel as I feel. It would be an insult to every royal family in Europe. These are the things which I have come to say. You must abandon your purpose, or ——"

"Or?"

There was a moment's deep silence. She shook her head very slowly.

"There is not a noble of Theos, your Majesty, who would not consider himself justified in rescinding his oath to a king who could stoop so low."

Ughtred eyed her gravely.

"Marie," he said, "you are a peeress of Theos in your own right, and as such you yourself have taken an oath of allegiance to me."

"It is true, your Majesty," she answered, coldly. "And I tell you now that the announcement of your betrothal to Sara Van Decht would in my opinion and before my conscience justify me in breaking that oath. And your Majesty must remember further that those who are not with you are against you."

The King sat down and leaned his head upon his hand. Was this really how the people of Theos would regard his marriage, if indeed it should ever come to pass? The girl was so terribly in earnest, and of personal feeling it seemed after all that she had none. A cloud crept over his face.

"It is a threat," he said, quietly. "Countess, I beg that you will leave me. I will think over all that you have said, and I will discuss it fully with your brother, and my other advisers. Forgive me if I add that I think it would be more fitting."

He pointed to the open panel. She held up her head as though listening, but Ughtred heard nothing. Then she looked once more at the King. Something in his face reminded her for the moment of the man whom he resembled. He was tired, and his distress touched her heart. She moved suddenly over to his side and dropped upon her knee. The heavy sleeves fell back from her wrists, her white fingers touched his arms. She remembered that they had been young together, and after all the destinies of Theos were largely in his hands. He looked into her face and was amazed at the change. Her tone no longer shook with anger. She pleaded to him.

"Your Majesty, you and I were children together. Listen to me. I have lived in Theos all my life, and the love of my country has become a religion to me. For her sake, listen. You must not think any more of Sara Van Decht. Your marriage would be impossible. The House of Laws would not permit it, the nobility of Theos, of whom alas there are but few left, would not tolerate it. I am speaking the truth to you. As for what has been between you and me it shall go for nothing. I—listen—I love another man. Wait for a few years, and then seek for a wife where the royal House of Theos has the right to seek. I, who know, tell you that this is your duty—that even now your throne is in peril that you know nothing of."

For the fraction of a second Ughtred hesitated, seeking about in his mind only how best to terminate a painful situation. And that brief period became almost a fatal interlude, for she saw what was passing in his

mind. Then a low, fierce cry came to them from the shadows of the room. Nicholas of Reist stood on the threshold of the open panel, his drawn sword quivering in his hand.

CHAPTER XXXIII

It was a curiously deep silence which reigned for many moments in the King's chamber. Ughtred slowly drew a little apart from Marie and glanced sternly from one to the other. His momentary suspicion, however, died away. The look on the face of Nicholas of Reist was such as no man, even the most consummate of actors, might assume.

"What news do you bring?" the King said, quietly. "Is all well at Solika?".

Reist pointed to his sister.

"There are no fresh tidings," he answered. "I await your Majesty's explanation of my sister's presence here."

Ughtred drew himself up. The blood of an ancient race asserted itself. He eyed Reist coldly. It was the King who faced a rebellious subject.

"I have no explanation to offer to you, Duke of Reist," he answered. "Seek it instead from your sister. It is she who should afford it you, seeing that her presence here was undesired by me, and unexpected."

"Your Majesty lies!" Reist thundered.

There was a deep and awful silence. Then Ughtred turned upon him, a fierce flash of anger in his blue eyes.

"Duke of Reist," he said, "you are a privileged person at this Court, and I have called you my friend. You will unsay those words, or hand me your sword."

"I repeat," Reist said, fiercely, "that your Majesty lies."

The King pointed to the open panel.

"Countess," he ordered, "leave us. This matter is between your brother and myself. We can settle it best in your absence."

She turned to her brother.

"Nicholas," she said, "the King's word is truth. I came here without any knowledge of his. I remained here against his will. It was unwise, perhaps, but the fault was mine. I wished to hear from his own lips what truth there was in these rumours of his coming marriage."

"Was it your place to ask the King these things?" he demanded, fiercely. "Was it dignified or seemly of you—you, his affianced bride?"

"I am not his affianced bride, Nicholas," she answered. "That was an idle ceremony. It was true we drank together of the King's cup, but its history was unknown to him."

He eyed them both with a fierce scorn.

"God alone knows of what cup you have drunk together," he cried, bitterly. "How often have you found it necessary to seek him here in the solitude of his chamber? How often have you used this infernal passage?"

"To seek the King, never," she answered firmly. "I used it when I found Brand here. If I had not, Theos might to-day have been a Russian State."

He pointed with unshaking finger to the opening in the wall.

"Pass away, Marie!"

She hesitated.

"It is the truth which I have told you, Nicholas," she said.

He thrust before her eyes a piece of paper.

"You are young, Marie, to lie so glibly even for your lover's sake. Here is the message which summoned you here, written in the King's handwriting, signed with the King's name. You left it on the table, so that even the servants might know of the shame which has come upon our House."

The King crossed the room and looked over Marie's shoulder. It was indeed his own notepaper, and the writing of those few words strangely resembled his.

"Come now, I am alone.—U."

The King looked up with grave face.

"It is a forgery!" he said.

"It is a forgery," Marie echoed, white to the lips.

Nicholas of Reist said nothing. He pointed to the open panel. A look of horror flashed into the girl's face. She understood.

"Nicholas," she cried, "that message never came from the King. Where you found it I do not know, but I never saw it before. You must believe me, Nicholas. The King was ignorant of my coming. He was unwilling that I should remain even for a moment."

"I repeat," the King said, gravely, "that the writing which you hold in your hands is a forgery, Nicholas. I have never written to your sister in my life. This is part of a plot which shall be sifted to the bottom."

Still Nicholas stood silent before the panel, and Marie passed out. He shut it carefully. Then he turned to the King, who was still standing with that half-sheet of notepaper in his hand.

"Your Majesty," he said, "I desire to know whether it is your intention to marry my sister."

The King looked him squarely in the face.

"Nicholas," he said, "have I ever in my life done or said anything to give rise to such a belief?"

"Your Majesty," Reist answered, with a bow, "has been ever most discreet. Yet before witnesses you pledged my sister in our ancient betrothal cup, well knowing its immutable record."

"That is true," the King answered, "but at the time I showed clearly that with me at least it was a jest. I plead guilty to an act of folly. I came straight here from life amongst a people to whom symbols and ceremonies have become as empty things—a practical and utilitarian people, and I did not recognize the passionate clinging of the dwellers in these more romantic countries to old customs and old ritual. I deeply regret it, Nicholas. I have no other regret."

Reist pointed to the letter which still remained in the King's fingers. Ughtred tore it through with a gesture of contempt.

"I did not write it," he said. "I did not invite your sister's presence."

Reist controlled himself with a visible effort.

"Your Majesty," he said, "I beg you for one moment to reflect. I appeal once more, less for your sake or mine, than for our country's, to your honour. Your

throne you owe to me. I have been your faithful servant, and my sword is yet wet with the blood of your enemies. Our name is great throughout Europe. An alliance with us can only strengthen your hold upon the people. It ill becomes me to force these things upon you, but the issue is great. Do you seek the hand of my sister in marriage?"

"I do not," the King answered. "I never have done. Wait."

Reist paused with his hand upon the hilt of his sword. The King continued.

"For the sake of my kingdom I do not order you from my presence, Reist. We are in danger, as you know, and I can ill spare a brave man. Listen. On my honour I, Ughtred of Tyrnaus, declare to you that the letter you found is a forgery, that your sister's presence here was as much a surprise to me as to you, that I never for one single moment failed in the respect which I owe to her as the sister of my best subject."

"That," Reist said, coldly, "is your Majesty's last word?"

"It is."

Reist drew his sword from his scabbard and bent it upon the ground till the blade snapped. The pieces he threw before the King.

"I resign my position in the army," he said, "and I withdraw my oath of allegiance. We are on equal terms now, Ughtred of Tyrnaus, and I demand satisfaction from you for this affront upon my House."

Ughtred eyed him sternly for a moment, but without anger.

"First, sir," he said, "discharge yourself of your duty. Report to me of the position at Solika."

"We have withstood a fierce attack," Reist answered, coldly, "and driven the Turks off with heavy losses. I regret to add, however, that Solika is a hotbed of Russian intrigue, and what we gain in the field we shall doubtless lose through treachery. My force are encamped outside the city, and there are scouts duly posted to warn us of any fresh attack. I desire your answer, Ughtred of Tyrnaus."

The King's eyes flashed with anger.

"Be careful, sir," he exclaimed, "or my answer will be a file of soldiers and the prison."

There was a brief pause. An angry spot burned on Reist's cheeks, but he kept silent.

"My answer to you is this, sir," the King said. "All duties which I owe as a private individual are secondary to those I owe my country. So long as the war lasts I decline your challenge. The day it is over I will meet you under any condition you choose to name. Now go!"

"But ——"

"Sir," the King thundered, "I do not bandy words with my subjects. Go!"

Reist passed out in silence. The panel rolled heavily back. The King was alone! He sank heavily on to his couch and buried his face in his hands.

CHAPTER XXXIV

Once more brother and sister stood face to face in the great shadowy audience-room of the Reist palace. Again, too, there was the clamour of many voices in the streets below, for a messenger had just galloped in with news from the front, and a sad procession of ambulance wagons had arrived for the hospital. Only it seemed to them both that that other day, of which both for a moment thought, lay far back in some uncertain past. Events had marched so rapidly during the last few months that all sense of proportion and distance was lost. They looked at one another with white, haggard faces. Marie saw that her brother no longer wore his sword.

"What has happened?" she asked, faintly.

The fires of hell were smouldering in his dark eyes. Yet he answered with some attempt at calmness.

"I challenged him. I had the right! He did not deny it, but he will not fight until the war is over. I have broken my sword. I am an outcast from my people—and he is still their king. Marie, you have brought great trouble upon our House."

"It was not I who brought him here," she answered. "I was against it always. The trouble is of your making—and his. He drank with me from the King's cup."

"Ay! And to-night he refused absolutely to marry

you, Marie. I suffered the everlasting humiliation of offering your hand—to have it refused."

She drew a short, quick breath. It was humiliation indeed. A sudden wild anger seized her. She locked and interlocked her fingers nervously.

"They are an accursed race, these men of Tyrnaus," she cried. "They make vows only to break them. Their honour is a broken reed."

Then Nicholas, his face gleaming white through the darkness, leaned over to her.

"Marie," he said, "those written words—which summoned you to him—were his?"

She hesitated. He raised his hand.

"Marie," he said, solemnly, "answer me as though your foot were upon the threshold of eternity. Remember that the name of Reist will become a name of shame for ever if you speak falsely. He is young, and he came here a stranger to us and our traditions. With our country in peril I might forgive for the while his broken troth—if that were all. But if he has dared to hold you lightly—that I cannot forgive. Tell me the truth! Was that message, indeed, from him which summoned you to a clandestine meeting?"

She met his fixed gaze with beating heart. Her bosom rose and fell quickly. She was torn with a hundred emotions. At last she answered.

"Nicholas," she said, "I know nothing of that note. I sought the king of my own free will."

Reist paced the room with quick, uneven footsteps. Marie sat at the table, her head buried in her hands. He did not approach her. Through the open window

came the dull booming of guns. The sound was a torture to him.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, at last.

"God only knows!" he answered, bitterly. "I have no King and no country. Yet if I stay here I shall go mad."

She removed her hands from her face and looked at him stealthily.

"If there were a way," she whispered, "to save Theos, and to be avenged on Ughtred of Tyrnaus."

He stopped short.

"What do you mean?"

"If there were still a way," she whispered, "by which our old dream might come true. If it were still possible that you might become the saviour of our country, might even now rescue it from the Turks ——"

"Plain words," he cried. "Let there be no enigmas between you and me. What do you mean?"

She looked at him more boldly.

"If a great Power should say 'I will not help Theos in her trouble because I do not recognize Ughtred of Tyrnaus, but if the right man is willing to accept the throne—so—I will stretch out my hand—the war shall cease—Theos shall be free.' What do you think of that, Nicholas?"

He looked at her with new eyes.

"Whose thoughts are these?" he asked, slowly.

"Domiloff's!"

"He has spoken to you?"

"Yes!"

"It is treason," he cried, hoarsely. "I will have none of it."

"Who," she asked, "is a greater traitor than Ughtred of Tyrnaus?"

He was silent.

"Who," she cried, "is better beloved in Theos?—who could rule the people more wisely than you, Nicholas? It would save our country from conquest and pillage. It is—the only way. Is it not what we have spoken of before—have not you yourself pointed upwards to that motto, whose writing is surely no less clear to-day? Oh, Nicholas, you cannot hesitate."

He walked to the window and looked out towards the hills, where the red lights still flared and the guns made sullen music. Her words were like poison to him.

"Listen, Nicholas," she said. "While Ughtred of Tyrnaus is king no help will come to us from any other nation, and without help how can Theos hold out against a hundred thousand Turks? We have few soldiers and fewer guns. Our population will be decimated, our country laid waste, and the end will be slavery. It is for you to save us all. It is you who can save Theos."

He looked at her with cold, stern eyes.

"How long have you been the confidante of Domiloff?"

"It is only lately," she answered, "that he has spoken to me of these things. I think, Nicholas, that he is afraid of you."

"Perhaps," Reist remarked, bitterly, "he mistook me for an honest man."

"It is freedom for Theos," she said, softly, "and revenge upon the King. Whatever may befall him from our hands he has deserved."

"Is Domiloff still in Theos?" he asked.

She nodded.

"You will find him at the Café Metropolitan," she said, "only he is now a Frenchman. You must ask for Monsieur Abouyat."

Reist moved restlessly up and down the room. Often his fingers sought the place where his sword should have been.

"Something I must do," he muttered. "I might disguise myself as a peasant and fight in the ranks. To be here idle is horrible; to go to Domiloff—I cannot!"

He looked gloomily out into the darkness. The inaction was unendurable. She crossed the room to his side and laid her hand upon his arm.

"It is not by standing still, Nicholas, or by indecision that you can preserve your country or avenge your honour," she said. "Go to Domiloff. Hear what he has to say. Then ask yourself what is best for Theos."

"Domiloff has the tongue of a fiend," he answered, "or a serpent. I do not dare to trust myself with him. Russia would play us false in the end. Our freedom would be undermined. I myself should be a puppet, a doll, at the beck and call of a master. Oh, I know how these Russians treat an independent State if once their fingers are upon her throat."

"You talk as though Theos were not already doomed," she cried. "What hope have we as it is? Nicholas, have you ever thought what must happen when the Turks have crossed the frontier. You know their way—it is blood and fire and desolation. Have you considered the women and children, Nicholas?"

He groaned. The recollection of former raids was lurid and terrible enough. It was hard for him to see clearly. And his scabbard was empty.

"I will go to Domiloff," he said at last. "I will hear what he has to say."

CHAPTER XXXV

It was very dark, very stuffy, and a strong, malodorous suggestion of garlic pervaded the little *café*. The ordinary customers of the place preferred always the round tables outside, and very few passed through the worn swing doors which led to the gloomy interior. The two men who occupied one of the small partitions had the place to themselves.

"It is not the time, this, for any weak scruples, my dear Reist," Domiloff was saying. "Theos in a week's time will be either a Russian State forever, or once more a free country with a ruler who is one of her own sons, and in whom my master can repose every confidence. You see I am very frank with you. I admit that this attack upon your country is the will and the decree of Russia. It was broached in London, confirmed in St. Petersburg, and planned in Constantinople. Yet, believe me, it was conceived in no spirit of enmity to Theos. It is simply this. We will not have a Tyrnaus upon the throne of Theos."

"Your country," Reist answered, hoarsely, "has no great reputation for generosity. What are we to pay for our freedom? You would not have me believe that there is no price."

"There is none," was the quiet answer, "which you, as a patriot and a Thetian, need hesitate to pay. We should require the abolition of the present edict pro-

hibiting Russians from holding public offices, and a few more such unimportant concessions. They are nothing. They will serve only to knit our countries more closely together in friendship."

Reist laughed hardly.

"Yet I think," he said, "that the freedom of Theos would become somewhat of a jest were I to accept your terms."

"The alternative," Domiloff remarked, "may seem more pleasing to you. Yet I have heard people say unpleasant things of the Turkish yoke."

"Theos is not yet conquered," Reist answered. "Ughtred, to do him justice, is a soldier, and my people have the love of fighting born in their hearts."

"The odds are too great—and you know it," was the quiet reply. "Besides, the Turkish army is led by Russians and supplied with Russian artillery. The result is certain."

"There may be intervention!"

"From whom?" Domiloff asked, smiling. "France is the monkey who dances to my master's music—Austria is bound to us, Germany is geographically powerless."

"There is England."

Domiloff laughed outright.

"England as a European Power," he declared, "has ceased to exist. A few Dutch farmers have pricked the bubble of her military reputation. If she should have the sublime impudence to lift her voice we should treat her with the contempt she has earned. No, Reist, there will be no intervention. Your brave Thetians will be

cut to pieces, your country will be pillaged and burned, your women will become the consorts of the Turkish soldiery, your ladies will go to grace a Turkish harem. These things must be unless you have the courage to hold out your hand. You call yourself a patriot. Prove it! The issue is plain enough."

The words bit into Reist's heart. He sat in gloomy silence. From afar off he seemed to hear the battle-cry of his beloved soldiers, the thunder of hoofs, the flashing steel, the glory of the charge thrilled his blood. There was patriotism indeed—there, where the lances dripped red and the bullets flew. And he, Nicholas of Reist, sat skulking in the back room of a doubtful *café*, safely out of harm's reach, talking treason with one who had ever been the foremost of his country's enemies.

"You bought Metzger," he said, "and the people cast him out. You may buy me, and yet the people will not accept your terms. They will not have Russians in authority over them. The hatred of your country is a religion with them."

"They believe in you as they would believe in no other man," Domiloff answered. "You can make the situation clear to them. In your heart you know that it is their only salvation."

"They may save their skins," Reist admitted, "but after all life is a short thing. It is better to die like gods than to live like slaves."

Domiloff shook his head.

"My friend," he said, "there is but one life that we know anything of, and it should not be lightly thrown

away. You can save Theos if you will. Supposing, however, that you are obstinate—that you cling to your ancient prejudices—well, what will you do then? Consider your position. You have quarrelled with the King. Your place in the army has gone, you have surrendered your sword. How can you ever show yourself in Theos again, who lingered here in the hour of battle? Be wise, my friend. Before you there is but one possible course. Take it. The day will come when every man who calls himself a Thetian will bless your name."

"Or curse it!" Reist muttered.

"Curse it, indeed," Domiloff answered, "if you play the coward. It is the hour now for a strong man to rise. You are that man. Ughtred of Tyrnaus, whom you call your king, is even now forging the fetters to lead Theos into slavery. It is for you to thrust him aside and save your people."

"His is the nobler way," Reist cried, bitterly. "Domiloff, I can listen to you no longer. I am not the man you seek. My feet are not used to these tortuous ways. I will ask the King's pardon. He will give me back my sword, and I can at least find a glorious death."

"You can fight then for a King who has deprived you of your sword?" Domiloff whispered. "You can forgive him the insult he has thrust upon your sister. You can bear to think of her, slighted for the daughter of an American tradesman. Who is Ughtred of Tyrnaus that he should do this thing, and that the Duke of Reist should ask his pardon!"

Reist ground his teeth.

"I can force my way into the ranks and fight unknown," he said, hoarsely. "It would be better to die there than to live to listen to your poisonous whisperings. I do not trust you, Domiloff. I cannot. I have no pledge that you would keep your word."

A sudden change flashed into the white face of the Russian. He sat perfectly still—listening. Reist opened his lips to ask a question, but it remained unasked. He, too, heard the sound. Somewhere behind the partition a man's breathing was distinctly audible. Domiloff's hand sought his pocket, and he rose softly to his feet.

The intruder, whoever he might be, did not hesitate for a second. He leaped through the window by which he had entered, and ran down the passage. Domiloff followed him, and peering forward fired a couple of shots in rapid succession. Apparently they were fruitless, for the fugitive gained the open space in front of the *café* and mingled with the crowd. There was a rush of bystanders towards the two men, but Domiloff raised his hands and cried in Thetian —

"A Turk! A Turk! A spy! Follow him!"

There was a rush across the street. Domiloff and Reist exchanged rapid glances with one another.

"A spy indeed, but a spy from the other side," Domiloff muttered. "I wonder how much he heard."

But Reist was speechless. To him the interruption had come like the awakening from a horrible dream. There was a man then—a man of Theos who knew him for a traitor.

The hue and cry had left them alone. Suddenly Domiloff stooped down. A soft felt hat lay almost at their feet. Through the brim and crown was a small round hole.

"It is his hat," Domiloff muttered. "Why did I not aim an inch lower?"

He struck a match, and looked for the name inside the lining. It was Scott and Co., Bond Street, London.

Reist felt his cheeks burn, though the night was cool. Domiloff's voice sounded unnaturally calm.

"It was the Englishman then, Walter Brand. Good!"

"The King's friend," Reist faltered.

Domiloff nodded.

"I do not think," he said, "that he will ever see the King again."

CHAPTER XXXVI

LATE that night a man stood motionless amongst the shrubs in the garden of the Reist house. His eyes were fixed always upon a certain window where a light was burning. He muttered often to himself, and the things which he said were not pleasant to hear. He was tired and cramped with his long waiting—yet so long as that light burned he dared not approach the house.

There came to him at last a welcome sound, a light footstep and the trailing of a skirt upon the gravel path. He leaned forward.

"Countess, I am here."

Marie stooped to pluck a flower, and slipped behind the shrub. They were now invisible from the house.

"You received my note?" he asked.

"Yes."

"It was more than two hours ago. I am cold and tired with waiting. Was it necessary to keep me here so long?"

"Quite," she answered. "I came as soon as it was safe."

"Who has been with your brother to-night?" he asked.

"How do you know that we have not been alone?"

He pointed to the light still burning in the window.

"That light," he said. "See, it is just extinguished. Your visitor has gone."

She laughed bitterly.

"You are well served—by my servants," she said.

"It is for all our interests! The visitor?"

"It was General Kolashin."

"The General himself?"

"Yes. He came to reason with my brother about giving up his command."

Domiloff frowned.

"Your brother did not waver?"

"He wavered a good deal. But for me I think that he would have returned to camp. I am sorry now that I interfered."

"You are not in a pleasant humour to-night, I fear, Countess."

"I am never in a pleasant humour when I have to do with—such as you. Treason and deceit are ugly things, to us, at least, Baron Domiloff."

"I do not agree with your terms, Countess," he answered, "but this is scarcely the place or the time for argument. Your brother?"

"He awaits you."

"He has spoken of our interview?"

"Yes!"

"And you have told him?"

"To beware of Baron Domiloff," she answered, coolly.

He bent over to read her face, uncertain in the dim twilight.

"You are jesting," he murmured.

"It is very possible," she admitted.

She turned away from him, and looked towards the

hills. The muttering of artillery still continued. Domiloff was uneasy.

"Countess," he said, "I must go in to your brother, for this evening we were overheard in the Café Metropolitan, and I am not safe in the city any longer. But, I pray you to tell me this. What is your brother's disposition concerning these matters of which we have talked?"

She shook her head.

"I cannot tell you. I have done what I can, but he himself is torn with doubts and fears. The sound of the guns, and the thought of the fighting goads him to madness. I have done what I promised. Through me he has broken with the King, and I have sent him to you. The rest you should have accomplished."

"And so I should," Domiloff declared, fiercely, "but for that cursed interruption. It is ill to do with men who do not know their own minds."

"Or with women in the like straits, my friend," she murmured.

He shot a quick glance at her.

"Of you," he declared, quietly, "I have no fear. You would not see this American girl Queen of Theos. I do not think that you would stand in waiting before her throne."

Marie's face was for a moment white with passion. She seemed as though she would strike him. Domiloff watched her narrowly. He liked to be sure of every one with whom he had to deal, and there were times when she eluded him.

"No," she answered at last. "It is not likely that I

should do that. Baron Domiloff, I will show you the way to my brother's room."

"One moment."

He touched her arm. She drew it away with an angry exclamation. Domiloff was not without vanity, and his personal repugnance to her, which she was at no pains to hide, galled him. For a moment he dared not trust himself to speak.

"Will you be so good as to remember," she said, with cutting force, "that my toleration of you is on account of Theos, and Theos only. Personally, I hate all conspirators and plotters. The idea of this sort of thing and everybody connected with it is loathsome to me."

He bowed low. It was as well that she could not see his face.

"Countess," he said, "you will excuse my familiarity, but there was a matter—an urgent matter—which I had yet to mention to you. There is a man who must die unless he leaves Theos in four-and-twenty hours. I have heard him called your friend—else he were a dead man at this moment."

She looked at him doubtfully.

"You do not mean the King?"

"No! I mean Walter Brand, the English journalist."

She started. Domiloff watched her keenly.

"What has he done?" she asked.

"What has he not done. You remember his first appearance here?"

She laughed softly.

"I remember it very well," she answered. "He was bold enough to befool the wily Baron Domiloff—to play

with him and beat him at his own game. Yes, his first coming I remember very well indeed."

The darkness hid Domiloff's face. His voice was under perfect control.

"I bear him no special grudge for that," Domiloff said, "but it was only the beginning. He has done his very best to oppose us throughout. He is the King's most intimate friend, he is our most dangerous enemy. His letters from here are influencing the whole European Press. In England they have created a sensation, and in Germany also. They have been translated into every language, and copied everywhere. The time has come when they must cease."

She felt the significance of his words. She was not altogether unmoved under his close scrutiny.

"He is an Englishman," she said, "and it is dangerous to interfere with Englishmen."

"Nevertheless it must be done," he declared. "To-night it has become a matter of urgency."

"How so?"

"Because, not content with the mischief which he has already done, he must needs play the spy upon one or both of us. To-night he was at the Café Metropolitan and overheard some part of my conversation with your brother."

A sudden colour flushed her cheeks. Her eyes were bright.

"He is a brave man," she cried.

Domiloff shrugged his shoulders.

"The difference between a brave man and a fool," he said, "is so slight. But listen, Countess! You wish his life spared?"

"If harm comes to him through you or any of your creatures," she cried, with a little burst of passion, "I will go to the King and have you hung in the market-place."

There was a moment's silence. Domiloff was staggered by her bold words.

"Countess," he said, "his safety lies with you. I give you this opportunity to warn him."

"To warn him? But I do not know where he is," Marie protested. "Besides, he would not heed me."

"To-morrow," Domiloff answered, "I may be able to acquaint you with his whereabouts. I must at least have him watched and his dispatches intercepted. He is absolutely our most dangerous opponent."

"But even if he were to receive a message from me, he would not come if he were at the front," Marie said.

"He comes every day to Theos to send off his cables," Domiloff answered. "I shall send you word where he is, and you must send for him. It is absolutely necessary that he come over to our side."

"He is not the kind of man to desert a losing cause," Marie said. "He would not listen to me."

Domiloff gave vent to an impatient gesture.

"He must listen to you, Countess, or die," he said.

She looked him in the face.

"You will remember my threat, Baron Domiloff," she said. "Those were no idle words."

He bowed low.

"We will go to your brother," he said.

CHAPTER XXXVII

The King entered from his ante-chamber and took his place at the head of the long table amidst a profound and depressing silence. The faces of his counsellors were grave indeed. The military members were all at the front. Those who remained were the merchants and men of peace, and to them the guns whose roar seemed ever increasing spelled ruin.

Old Baron Doxis took the chair. He opened the proceedings with dim eyes and a shaking voice. Theos was dear to him, but so also were his sons and nephews, some of whom he could scarcely hope to see again. The routine business was quickly dispensed with. The King in a few sentences told them the war news of the day.

Then Baron Doxis rose again.

"Your Majesty," he said, "this meeting of our Inner Council you yourself have pronounced an wholly informal one. We are sitting here with closed doors. We are all, I believe, patriots and Thetians. Let me ask your Majesty, therefore, if every means have been tried to avoid the destruction which threatens us?"

The faces of all were turned towards the King.

"My friends," he said, slowly, "I have heard it whispered, not amongst you, perhaps, but yet amongst those who might have known me better, that this war is the outcome of my own military activity, that it is a war

which might have been prevented. Let me implore you not to give credit to any such idea. It is a cruel war, an unjust war, and—we must look the worst in the face. It may mean the extinction of Theos as an independent nation. But it has been brutally thrust upon us. We have been powerless to avoid it. We have given no offence, we have striven for peace, knowing that by peace alone we can prosper. The pretext for the commencement of hostilities was a false one. An absolutely faithful account of all that passed between Effenden Pascha and ourselves has been set down on paper and forwarded to Constantinople—also to every Court in Europe. I have appealed to every reigning sovereign for intercession. What is left to us but to fight? The enemy have crossed our frontier. But for our dispositions and the bravery of our soldiers they would be even now at the gates of Theos. If I failed in my duty, tell me where. What could I have done?"

Baron Doxis rose up again.

"Your Majesty," he said, "we do not presume to doubt your word. We believe in the justice of our cause, and we will believe that these movements on the part of the Turks are movements of ruthless aggression. But, bearing in mind our hopeless inferiority in numbers, I must ask whether any steps have been taken to ascertain the terms on which peace would be granted to us."

The King's face was set and grave.

"Baron Doxis," he said, "we have not yet approached the Commander-in-Chief of the Turkish forces on this subject. But I can tell you well what the

answer would be. The surrender of your army, of our city, the pillaging of our houses, the outraging of our women. Have you not yet learned how the Turks make war?"

Baron Doxis remained upon his feet. He passed his trembling hand along his snow-white beard.

"Your Majesty," he said, "these are the days of civilized warfare, and it is possible that more restraint might be exercised over the Turkish soldiery now than in the days gone by. I humbly submit that the demands of the invaders be ascertained and submitted to us."

The King remained silent for a minute. Then he looked up, and though his lips trembled his voice was firm enough.

"You can send your instructions to General Dartnoff," he said. "I shall not interfere. At the same time, I feel bound to tell you that I look upon any such appeal as hopeless. We have no hope, save in God, in our arms, and from the possible intercession of one or more of the Powers."

Tavener, a merchant, who was suspected of Jewish descent, rose timidly to his feet.

"Your Majesty has come to-night from the seat of war," he said. "May we ask of these rumours concerning the Duke of Reist? It is rumoured that the Duke has abandoned his command and returned his sword to your Majesty."

"The rumour is correct," the King answered.

There was an uneasy murmur of voices. Baron Doxis rose.

"Your Majesty, we should esteem some further particulars as to this action on the part of the Duke of Reist. We have always been accustomed to consider him one of the born leaders of this country."

"The resignation of the Duke," Ughtred said, "is due to a personal matter which I am not at liberty to explain to you. No one can regret it more than I do."

An ominous silence followed. Ughtred was conscious of it, yet there seemed to be nothing which he could do to dispel it. He knew that the loyalty of these men was being sorely taxed. In their hearts they believed him responsible for the war. This severance with Reist encouraged them in their belief. Baron Doxis rose slowly to his feet.

"Your Majesty," he said, slowly, "as the oldest member of this council, as the oldest inhabitant of Theos here present, will you permit me to say a word respecting the Duke of Reist?"

The King inclined his head.

"I am prepared to hear you, Baron Doxis," he said.

"The Duke of Reist," Doxis continued, "is the sole representative of the one family in Theos who for centuries have served their country faithfully as true patriots. The Duke of Reist it was who is solely responsible for the restoration of the monarchy. It was he who found your Majesty out and brought you here to reign over us."

Ughtred looked up.

"I am conscious," he said, "of all that Nicholas of Reist has done for Theos. I know, too, what I personally owe him. I believe him at heart to be a true

and devoted patriot. Yet for all this the quarrel between us is not of my seeking. I cannot go to him and order him into the field. Seek him yourselves, if you will. He has spoken words to me which no one, not even the first noble in Christendom, has a right to use to his sovereign. I pass that over. I demand no apology. Let him resume his place in the field and his command, if he will. I would not place my own dignity before the good of Theos. The Assembly is dismissed, gentlemen."

The King retired to his own apartments. His servant was in waiting.

"Your Majesty has four hours before the time appointed for the special train," he announced. "The sleeping chamber is prepared."

Ughtred waved him away.

"I shall not retire," he said. "Leave me alone."

He leaned forward in his easy-chair and buried his face in his hands. Only a month ago life had seemed such a fair thing. He had been full of plans and dreams. He had envied no man in Europe. And now he seemed hemmed about with disaster. He was no longer the hero of the people. He had lost his best friend—between his counsellors and himself an ominous gulf was widening every hour. There were whispers of treason in the city, his isolation would soon become an accomplished fact. Almost his courage failed him.

The door was softly opened and closed. He looked up wearily, then sprang to his feet. It was Sara who was coming across the room towards him with outstretched hands.

"Sara."

He took her into his arms, from which she presently escaped, and carefully disengaged herself. Already he felt better at the sight of her.

"How did you come here, Sara?" he asked.

"I used your ring," she answered, showing it to him. "Father is in the next room."

"Your father has been very useful," he said. "He has been out with the engineer all day."

She laughed.

"He is amusing himself. But, Ughtred, I came to talk to you for a moment. They tell me that you are going back to the front directly."

"I must be there at daybreak," he answered. "Until then we have granted them an armistice—to bury their dead."

She nodded.

"I hear all about it. I was in the field-hospital all day, and the wounded were brought in shouting with joy. It was a great fight, Ughtred."

An answering gleam flashed in his eyes.

"You should have been a soldier's daughter, Sara."

Her face was suddenly grave. She was standing by his side with her hands loosely clasped behind her, her eyes upturned to his.

"Ughtred," she said, "I have come here to say something to you. There have been rumours of a quarrel between you and the Reists. Is that true?"

"There is something of the sort," he admitted.

"They say that the Duke of Reist has thrown up his command."

"Yes."

"Is it true, Ughtred, that you went through some sort of a betrothal ceremony with the Countess of Reist?"

He laughed heartily. Then he told her the story. She listened with grave face.

"You were scarcely to blame," she said, when he had finished. "But, Ughtred, I have begun to understand what should have been plain to me from the first—what you too should have thought of, perhaps. Our engagement would never be welcomed by your people. They love the old families and the old names. It would make you unpopular, and I believe it is at the bottom of your disagreement with the Reists. You must forget what you said, dear. It is best, indeed."

He turned upon her for the moment almost fiercely. He was overwrought.

"You, too!" he exclaimed. "My God, how lonely people can leave a King when the evil times come."

He saw her look of pain, and the tears fill her eyes. He turned suddenly and threw his arms about her.

"You love me, Sara. You do not want to take that back?"

"You know that I do not," she answered.

"Then put these things away from you till these troubles are past. At least let me have you to think of and fight for. Afterwards we will speak of them again."

She assented gladly.

"Only I want you to know, Ughtred," she said, "that I will never become your wife if it is to lessen

your hold upon your people here. I wish they could know it. Some of these poor wounded soldiers look at me as if I were their enemy. Why, it is terrible."

He smiled reassuringly.

"When the war is over we will talk of this seriously," he answered. "Listen."

He threw up the blind. It was still dark and apparently raining, but away eastwards there was a break in the clouds, and the stars were paler. In the courtyard below a carriage was waiting. He dropped the blind hastily, picked up his cloak.

"I must go, Sara," he declared. "Wish me luck, dear."

She clung to him with suddenly swimming eyes. Her lips trembled—her face was very wistful.

"Oh, my dear! My dear," she cried, softly, "if only I could bring you luck. If only I could be your mascotte."

He laughed cheerily. His arms were around her, and she was comforted.

"There is no better mascotte for a man in this world," he declared, "than the touch of the woman he loves. Send me back to the front, dear, with your kisses upon my lips and the sound of your voice in my ears, and I promise you that you shall hear great news."

When Ughtred passed out a few minutes later a rumour went through the palace that good news had come. For the King held his head high, and his eyes were as the eyes of a man who goes forth to victory looking upon pleasant things.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THROUGHOUT the night there was little attempt at sleep in the Thetian camp. Long lines of men, relieved every two hours that they might work at the utmost speed, were busy in the valley digging entrenchments. Guns were being dragged up to the heights and signalling stations fixed. With dawn came a proclamation from the King freely issued about the camp.

"Men of Theos and Soldiers of the Thetian Army.

"The thanks of the State are due to you for your brave fight yesterday, you and your gallant leaders. I am glad to tell you that at Althea Pass and Morania the enemy were also repulsed with great loss. So far then the fighting has gone wholly in our favour. Let us thank God, who has strengthened the arm of those whose cause is just, who resist an unwarranted and iniquitous invasion of their native land.

"The precautions which have been taken to guard against this act of brigandage encourage us to hope for success. We are not taken unawares. Since my accession to the throne of my ancestors I have, as you know, devoted every effort to strengthening our defences, to preparing so far as preparation was possible for the position in which we find ourselves to-day. Althea Pass is almost impregnable. I do not believe that the Turks will ever pass alive through the Moranian defiles.

Here it is that the final struggle must take place. It is you, my soldiers, who must bear the great burden of the fighting. The place of honour is yours, and the place of honour may be the place of death. It is meet therefore that I, your King, should be with you. I have therefore decided to take over the supreme command from your valiant and respected leader, General Dartnoff, and to lead you personally into battle. With God's help and your valour I have every trust and every hope in the future. I need not remind you that our cause is just and great. We fight for our homes—I for my palace, you for your homesteads—as brothers together. We fight for our freedom, for our womenkind, and the freedom of those who are to come after us. For my part I pledge myself to this. There shall be no submission on terms that I will ever accept save those which leave Theos as free in the future as it is to-day. For your part I ask you only to quit yourselves like the Thetians of old, to believe in me and obey, to remember always that God is with the weak, and He will surely protect us. Strike hard, obey unflinchingly, and if the whispers of treason should reach your ears scorn it as did those others who have fought before you. Do this, and I will lead you to victory."

At dawn a single horseman, attended by a small escort, galloped down from the shed where the light railway from Theos ended. General Dartnoff and a little group of officers stood in front of the former's quarters.

"It is Reist at last," one exclaimed.

But the General shook his head.

"It is the King," he declared. "See he is riding his own horse."

The old battle-cry rang like music in the King's ears as he galloped down the lines. He was fair to look upon in the faint early sunlight, bronzed and manly, a born soldier with a dash of the enthusiast. The men, fresh from reading his proclamation, welcomed him with thunderous cheers. Their shouts rose to the skies, and Ughtred breathed more freely. For these were Reist's men, and it was Reist's place which he must fill.

"Your Majesty is welcome to the camp," General Dartnoff said, saluting. "We were looking for the Duke of Reist."

The King passed into the tent, and motioned the General and the other officers to follow them. Then he turned and faced them.

"General Dartnoff," he said, "I regret to inform you that the Duke of Reist has resigned his command."

Blank astonishment was written into their faces. The thing was incredible.

"I beg your Majesty's pardon," General Dartnoff said, with some hesitation, "but do we indeed hear you rightly? The Duke of Reist has resigned his command —in time of war—at such a time as this? Nicholas of Reist!"

"It is unfortunately true," the King repeated.

"He is stricken with illness suddenly?" Dartnoff asked.

The King shook his head.

"I regret to say that the resignation of the Duke of

Reist is due to a personal matter between myself and him, in which he considers himself aggrieved."

There was a moment's silence. Quick glances were exchanged amongst the officers. Dartnoff was sorely puzzled.

"It was Nicholas of Reist who brought you here," he said, slowly. "It was his word and advice—which ——"

"Which made me King," Ughtred continued. "That is so. General Dartnoff and you, gentlemen, do not think that I treat this matter lightly. It has been a great blow to me—a great shock. But, listen. The Duke of Reist has no cause of offence against me whatever. He has been deceived and misled, and I have a fancy that Domiloff, who they say is still lurking about Theos, is concerned in it."

The General's face grew graver than ever.

"Nicholas of Reist," he said, "would never stoop to secret dealings with such men as Domiloff."

"I hope and believe not myself," the King answered promptly. "But such men as Domiloff work in the dark indirectly, and some one has poisoned the mind of Nicholas of Reist against me. But listen. I repeat that the matter is a personal one. For the moment it can well be left where it is. I will promise you this. After the war if Theos still exists and I am alive I will meet the Duke of Reist before you, General Dartnoff, and any three of our countrymen whom you may select, and you shall judge between us. If you find that I am in the wrong my abdication shall be at your service. If you decide in my favour the Duke of Reist's apology

and his hand will be sufficient for me. But, remember, that to-day we stand before the destinies of Theos. For God's sake do not let your loyalty or your faith in me be affected by this deeply-to-be-deplored incident. To do so would be to play into the hands of those who have poisoned the mind of the Duke of Reist against me. Give me your trust a little longer, I beg of you."

General Dartnoff stood in front of his officers, and he did not hesitate. The cloud had passed from his face.

"Your Majesty," he said. "We accept. Yet with your permission I would ask you this question. No man in Theos loves his country better than Nicholas of Reist. If he should desire to recall his words ——?"

The King held out his hand.

"I would offer it to him," he said, "as freely as I offer it now to you."

The cloud passed in substance away. Metterbee—a senior officer—respectfully intervened.

"Your Majesty," he said, "there is Reist's command."

The King looked around him.

"I am going to make one more demand upon your loyalty," he said gravely. "General Dartnoff, it is my wish that you take over the command of the Duke of Reist's corps. The chief command I am prepared to assume in person."

General Dartnoff smiled.

"If your Majesty makes no more serious demands upon our loyalty than this he will be well served," he answered. "There is no one more fit to command than you, sir. The present admirable disposition of our

forces is yours, not mine; so far I have been no more than a figurehead. Your plan of entrenchments has been a revelation to all of us."

There arose a little murmur of approval. Reist's defection was amazing, but this was the man who alone could save Theos. Ughtred felt a glow of pride and gratitude as he shook hands with his chief officers.

"And now, General," he said, "I must ask you to transfer your staff to me in order that I may give some instructions. The Turkish lines are clearly in view from our positions, I believe?"

The General bowed.

"We have reports every twenty minutes, your Majesty," he answered. "Anything in the nature of a surprise is impossible."

"Very well," Ughtred said. "Now, General, will you let me have in the course of half-an-hour an escort of two hundred picked men. I am going to enter Solika."

Dartnoff dispatched an officer with instructions. Then he turned to the King.

"Your Majesty is aware of the state of affairs within the walls?"

Ughtred nodded.

"Yes. I want the help of two or three residents of the city whose loyalty is above suspicion. Can you point out such to me?"

"More than two or three, I think, your Majesty," Dartnoff answered. "I will give their names to the officer commanding your escort."

Ughtred sat down at the head of the table.

"Let them bring some coffee then at once. In an hour I wish to start for Solika. The officers of my staff, and you, General Dartnoff, will please remain."

Breakfast was brought, and Ughtred talked for a few minutes to them all. He then explained that during the campaign he desired to rank as General only, to be addressed as sir, to be treated as commanding officer, and not as King. For the most part the officers were Thetians and Austro-Thetians. Keen soldiers and well up to their work, for, in addition to their regular duties, the drilling of the armed population had also devolved upon them. Ughtred looked them over, and his heart grew lighter. They were a little rough perhaps, and somewhat uneasy at first in his presence, but honest men, and soldiers to the backbone.

Towards midday Solika awoke into a state of wild excitement. The King was at the Town Hall with many of the leading inhabitants, and extraordinary rumours were flying about. The civil populace was to be invited to bear arms, foreigners were to be expelled, a great blow was to be struck at the mixed population, whose loyalty was doubtful. Fact followed fast upon the heels of rumour. The little street *cafés* were thronged with eager groups, all studying a proclamation wet from the press. The station was thronged with trains. All strangers must quit Solika in twelve hours. All residents not naturalized must take the oath of allegiance and hold themselves ready to bear arms, or leave in twenty-four hours. Property would be respected as far as possible, but the war laws of Theos had known no modification for five hundred years, and on every wall

appeared copies of the statute, and a schedule of treasonable practices, the penalty for which was death. Solika was in an uproar. A hasty but secret meeting of Russians was held at the house of the Consul. It was broken up by a detachment of soldiers, and every person there conducted in a guarded train to the frontier. Ughtred himself rode through the streets, and read in the faces of the angry crowds their extraction, and where their sympathy lay. There was scarcely a native Thetian there, for the men of Theos were excellent farmers and tillers of the land, but poor shopkeepers. Their wants were supplied by Jews and Russians, who robbed them regularly, and were only too ready now to welcome the coming of a richer race. Ughtred returned to the Town Hall, and knew that he had done well.

On the steps he stopped short. He was face to face with the man whom, more than any other, at that moment he desired to meet. It was Brand.

CHAPTER XXXIX

"At last," Brand exclaimed, with a gesture of relief. "I have been looking for you everywhere."

Ughtred glanced round. They were surrounded by a considerable crowd.

"You have something important to say to me, Brand?"

"Yes."

Ughtred motioned to an orderly.

"Procure a fresh horse for Mr. Brand," he said. "You will ride back to camp with me, Brand. We shall be away from this rabble then."

It was not until they were absolutely alone that Brand spoke.

"Your Majesty," he said, "Nicholas of Reist is a traitor."

The King turned in his saddle.

"I cannot believe that, my friend," he said. "Reist has quarrelled with me personally, and has resigned his command in the army. But that does not make him a traitor."

"Perhaps not," Brand answered, drily, "but association with Domiloff does."

Ughtred started. His face and his tone alike gave evidence of his unbelief. He even smiled.

"You are mistaken, my dear Brand," he said.

"Reist is a patriot and a nobleman. He would never stoop to league himself with such scum."

"I presume that my eyes are sufficient evidence," Bránd answered, quietly. "I myself saw Reist and Domiloff meet last night at a low *café* in Theos. I overheard part of their conversation."

The King's face was as the face of a man who has received a blow. For a moment or two he remained silent.

"They may have met by accident," he said, at last, looking half-fearfully towards Brand. "Domiloff may have proposed things to Reist, but he would not listen, no, he surely would not listen."

"You are mistaken," Brand declared, grimly. "He met Domiloff by appointment, and he listened with interest to all that he had to say."

"How do you know this, Brand?" the King asked.

"I have been watching the place for some time—and Domiloff. It ought to be burned. It is a hotbed of treason and Russian intrigue. I saw the meeting and heard part of the conversation. Unfortunately I was discovered."

"You were discovered?" Ughtred repeated.

"And Domiloff put a bullet through my hat," Brand continued. "I escaped, but it was a close thing. Since then I have had an opportunity of appreciating how widespread have been Domiloff's snares. My life has been attempted twice, and I have been misled by forged letters as to your whereabouts. I have been to Althea and Morania in search of you."

"And you heard some part of what passed between Domiloff and Reist?"

"Yes. Domiloff offered Reist the crown of Theos and Russian intervention in the present war."

"And Russian protection afterwards, I suppose," Ughtred remarked, bitterly.

"That is, of course, what is behind it all," Brand assented.

The face of the King grew stern and thoughtful. There was silence between the two men for some time.

"If any other man had told me of this," Ughtred said at last, "frankly I should not have believed them. It was Nicholas of Reist who was always warning me of Russia and Russian intrigue. He seemed to read Domiloff like a book."

"The quarrel which you spoke of between yourself and Reist," Brand said, thoughtfully—"was it serious?"

"It was forced upon me," Ughtred answered. "The Countess most unfortunately came to my room last night by the secret passage to warn me against—well, Brand, I do not see why I should not be frank with you—against an alliance with Sara Van Decht."

"She came—of her own will—without any suggestion from you?" Brand asked.

"Of course!" Ughtred answered. "I may not be a model of etiquette, but I should never dream of soliciting, of welcoming an interview from even so old a friend as the Countess of Reist under such circumstances. Well, in the midst of our conversation, which I was doing my best to curtail, her brother arrived unexpectedly from Solika and found us together. He chose to consider her presence in my room compromising, and demanded that I should marry her. After that—chaos.

As I told you, Reist has given up his command and deserted me. I believe that I have promised to fight him after the war is over."

"And the Countess?" Brand asked.

The King smiled bitterly.

"She too seems to be my enemy, though why I cannot imagine. She, at any rate, can bear no ill-will to me over that unfortunate affair of the betrothal cup, for she has told me plainly that she loves another man."

Brand's horse seemed to stumble, and his face was invisible for a moment as he stooped down to pat her neck. When he looked up there was a curious gleam in his eyes.

"Your Majesty," he said, "I am very sorry that this has happened. I believe that Domiloff is working very hard to induce the Duke of Reist to join in his plot against you."

The King looked sorrowfully away.

"Nicholas was my one friend here," he said. "I have only my soldiers now. God grant that their lives may not be frittered away—that we may not lose by treason what we gain in battle."

They talked for a while of the campaign. Brand, from his brief visit to Althea and Morania, was already conversant with the plan of operations. An old war correspondent, the muttering of the guns was like music to him.

"You should be able to hold your positions for a fortnight," he declared, "and by that time Theos will be ready for a siege. I see that you are making preparations for a retreat there."

"The women and children are being sent away every hour," the King answered. "I know that my men here are staunch, and so far as they are concerned the Turks will find nothing but a heap of smoking ruins when they enter Theos. It is not the actual fighting which troubles me, Brand."

Brand looked into the King's anxious face, and found there some clue to his doubtful words. He pointed with his riding whip to the distant city.

"It is treachery which you fear?" he remarked softly.

Ughtred nodded.

"I will tell you," he said, "there is something going on there which I cannot understand. It is Domiloff's work. I am sure of that. At the meeting of the Council last night I seemed to be somehow conscious of a general atmosphere of intrigue. There is something going on behind my back. Doxis plainly hinted that it would be better to make terms than waste the whole country by an impossible resistance, and when I asked him 'terms with whom?' he was silent. We know that the Turks have no terms to offer save unconditional surrender. What did he mean, then?"

"I fear," Brand said, "that Domiloff's schemes are more deeply laid than we at first believed. What a pity that he was ever allowed to remain in Theos."

"I sent him to the frontier once," Ughtred said. "He came back secretly."

"But your police?"

"Theos has no police now," Ughtred answered. "They are fighting at Althea. We could not afford to leave a hundred able-bodied men in the city."

Brand reined in his horse. The two men were on a hill from which the outposts of the Turkish army were distinctly visible. Brand took out his glasses and swept the country steadily for several minutes.

"I have a proposition to make," he said, after he had finished his survey. "I do not think that there will be any fighting to-day. If you like I will return to Theos and endeavour to find out what is going on."

The King held out his hand.

"If you will do this for me," he said, simply, "it will be the service of a friend. I think that I need friends now very badly."

So Brand turned his horse's head towards Theos, and the King rode down into the camp alone.

CHAPTER XL

"You!"

Marie of Reist rose with a sudden swift movement from the sofa where she had been lying.

"I trust that my visit is not as unwelcome as it seems to be surprising," he remarked, crossing the room towards her. "I am taking advantage ——"

She held up her hand—a quick, impulsive gesture of silence.

"Hush!" she whispered. "Do not say another word. Follow me and tread lightly."

He followed her into the circular stone wall, hung with ancient paintings, and where no light ever came save through those wonderful stained glass windows, the gift of an Emperor to Rudolph of Tyrnaus. They passed along a passage, up some stairs, and into a sitting-room. She closed the door softly, and stood for a moment with her hand still upon the handle, listening. Then, as all seemed quiet below, the fear passed from her eyes, and she smiled upon him.

"Are you mad to come here?" she asked, softly. "You ought not to show yourself in the streets. Do you not know that you are the most unpopular person in Theos?"

"I can assure you that I was not aware of it," he answered. "In any case, who in this house would be likely to wish me harm?"

"You are quite safe here, I think," she answered, ignoring his question. "My brother and some friends were in the next room down-stairs. I was afraid that they might hear your voice."

He sat down on the sofa beside her.

"I am not inclined," he said, "to quarrel with my good fortune. But as a matter of fact, it is your brother whom I wish to see. There is no reason why I should not—that I know of."

She shook her head.

"Nevertheless," she said, "be content to stay with me. It will be better for you. Oh yes, a very great deal better."

Brand moved a little nearer. It was certain that there was much which he could learn from her.

"It is very pleasant to see you again, Countess!" he remarked.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Countess?"

The colour flushed under his tanned cheeks. He looked away.

"Marie, then—if you will permit!"

"I do permit," she murmured, "only you must not say it very often—until I get used to it. Oh, my friend, how glad I am to see you, and yet how dangerous it is. Why do you go on filling all the newspapers in Europe with your letters from Theos, and your praises of the King? You have made enemies here. You are even now being sought for."

He smiled grimly.

"I thought that I must be becoming unpopular," he

said. "People are so anxious to find me that they send bullets—mostly very badly aimed ones—after me in the street. I do not understand it."

She shuddered and glanced nervously around her. The window by which they sat was commanded by another in the eastward wing of the house. She looked at it for a moment, and her eyes were full of fear once more.

"Even now," she murmured, "I believe that we are being watched. Look, do you see anything?"

He stood by her side, but the window was empty enough. Below, the square and streets beyond were strangely empty. A sense of desolation brooded over the place.

"I see nothing," he answered. "I really don't think that we need alarm ourselves."

She drew him away to the lounge heaped with furs and drawn up to the fire. An easel was standing in one corner of the room, and behind a piano. The walls were hung with water-colours and sketches, and the air was fragrant with the odour of burning logs. Beyond was an inner apartment.

"You are the first man, except Nicholas my brother," she said, "who has ever been in here. Remember that, please, and be very obedient. You will do all that I tell you. Will you promise?"

"Blindly," he answered, "if you will ask me nothing impossible."

"I shall not do that. I am going to ask you something for your own good. You must leave off writing those letters to the English newspapers."

He was suddenly very quiet and still. But he turned and looked at her.

"Why?"

"Because it is for your safety, for the good of Theos, and because it is my wish."

"Your wish—and whose else?"

"My brother's."

There was a moment's silence. She saw signs of a new sternness about the closely-drawn lips, the steel-grey eyes, from which a momentary tenderness seemed to have vanished.

"It is true, then, what I hear," he said, slowly. "Your brother has deserted the King?"

The change in her mood matched his. She drew herself up and looked at him with flashing eyes and uplifted head.

"My brother will not continue his allegiance to a sovereign who proposes to raise a tradesman's daughter to the throne of Theos, and who has offered an insult to our family."

"I am sorry to hear you talk like this," he answered. "The King has not willingly affronted you. It was your brother to whom he owes his throne. He has not forgotten it—he is never likely to forget it. He regarded you both as his best friends here. As for Sara Van Decht, the King would take no step without the sanction and consent of his people. She will be one of the richest women in Europe, and the whole of her dowry would be spent for the good of Theos. Even then if the voice of the people were against it the King would yield. The one aim of his life is the welfare of Theos and her people."

"So far in his care of them," she said, scornfully, "he has met with but little success. When before have the Turks crossed the frontier of our territory? When before have we been in such grievous straits as these?"

"For these things," he answered, "the King is blameless. This invasion of Theos is a long planned undertaking. Nothing could have stopped it. I believe that no other man in the world would have met the situation with so much skill and so resourcefully."

She was silent for a moment. Her very calmness seemed ominous. It seemed to him that underneath she was trembling with passion.

"Marie," he said, "I wonder that you are so blinded by this senseless prejudice against the King. But leave him for the moment out of the question. You love your country. For centuries the name of your family has been a great one in the history of Theos. Yet to-day both you and your brother are making a terrible mistake. You are drifting towards her enemies."

"Enough!" she cried. "I can see that you are still for the King."

"Most surely," he answered.

"You will not discontinue those letters?"

"No!"

She pointed to the door.

"Find your way out—if you can," she ordered, furiously. "I do not care what becomes of you. Only leave me!"

He took a quick step towards her, and grasped her wrists.

"Marie," he said, with a sudden hoarse passion,

"you can send me out to be shot if you like, but you shall kiss me first."

Her anger passed away like magic. Her slender arms drew his face down to hers. Her eyes were soft with tears.

"Dear," she murmured, "you shall not leave me like this. I thought that you had come here to join us—because you knew that I wanted you. And you speak only of the King as your friend—who is our enemy. Will you not be reasonable? There are brighter days in store for Theos. Stay with us and share them."

He shook his head sadly.

"You are being deceived," he said. "There is only one man who can save this country, and that man is Ughtred of Tyrnaus. He is honest—Domiloff is a rogue. These schemes of his have but one possible ending, and that is slavery for Theos—the total loss of her independence. Oh, it is all so plain, Marie—Domiloff's wiles are so transparent. Let me see your brother and reconcile him to the King."

"It is too late," she answered. "It is impossible."

"I have come here with a message from the King to him," he declared. "I must at least deliver it."

Her eyes gleamed with passion. Suddenly she threw her arms around his neck.

"You are very foolish, and I don't know why I should care for you," she cried, "but I do, I do! Listen. This is not your country. You are not a Thetian subject; the King has no claim upon you. If you will not help us, go away until it is all over. You can easily do that. Go away and wait. I will send for you when

it is all over. You will see then that I was right. No! you must not kiss me any more, dear. You must do as I say. Listen!"

She sprang away from him. There were footsteps in the corridor outside. Her face was ashen, a look of terror flashed in her eyes.

"They have found you out," she cried. "It is Domiloff and his men. Heaven help us!"

CHAPTER XLI

But, after all, it was only Nicholas of Reist who entered. He closed the door behind him carefully, and approached them. Brand stepped forward.

"I have a message for you," he said.

Reist smiled.

"A message which it seems you found necessary to deliver to my sister," he remarked. "I have not been informed of your desire to see me."

"I should not have left the house without doing so," Brand answered. "My message is from the King."

"Proceed."

Reist stood motionless before the window. In the clear daylight the physical change in the man was painful enough to witness. The flesh had fallen away from his cheeks, leaving great hollows underneath his eyes. His forehead was furrowed with lines, his pallor was unnatural and unwholesome. Brand saw these things, and wondered more than ever how the defection of such a man could have been brought about.

"The King bade me seek you out and remind you that in all human probability before to-morrow's sun has set the great battle will have been fought. The Turks are concentrating before Solika, and it is there that we shall fight. Your men are asking for you. At such a crisis in the history of your country the King does not believe that you will be content to sit in idleness. He

bids you come, and afterwards seek for redress, if any is needed, in the matters which rest between you and him."

"I thank you," Reist said, slowly. "To the King I return no answer to his message. To you I say this. I have lost confidence in Ughtred of Tyrnaus. I regret that my hand ever raised him to the throne. I recognize him no longer as the ruler of this country."

"Then you are a rebel?" Brand exclaimed. "Is that what you mean?"

Reist's dark eyes were lit with fire.

"Be careful, sir," he said, fiercely. "Those are not the words to be used to a Duke of Reist. By inheritance and by virtue of my name I, too, am the guardian of these people of Theos. I have lived with them all my life, as did my fathers and my grandfathers before me. Their freedom and their happiness are a solemn charge to me. I have come to the conclusion that Ughtred of Tyrnaus is not able to maintain for them either."

"Then who is?" Brand asked. "This war is none of his seeking. How in God's name could he do more for Theos than stand at the head of her people with drawn sword, prepared to die rather than submit to this barbarous invasion? Is there higher patriotism than this?"

"The King is your friend," Reist answered, "and you judge him from your own standpoint. Yet I am willing to admit that he is a brave man. Few cowards have ever sprung from Thetian stock. But bravery is not everything, and in the present case it can avail him

nothing. The odds are too overwhelming. If Theos is to be saved it will not be at the point of the sword."

Brand was within an ace of losing his temper. His cheeks were flushed and his voice was not so steady as usual.

"Theos will never be saved by those who plot with such rogues as Domiloff behind the city walls," he exclaimed. "Duke of Reist, I know you to be a brave man, or I would not dare to use these words to you. You are being grossly deceived. The Turks, and now you, are the catspaw of Russia. Domiloff's mission is to secure Theos for a Russian state. Oh, can't you see through his miserable scheming? I am an outsider in the game. Perhaps for that reason I am the better judge—I see the clearer. It is so simple! There will be a supposed rising of the people. You, or another of Domiloff's puppets, will be set up as King or Protector. The hand of Turkey will be stayed I grant you, but at the cost of an indemnity which you will never be able to pay. There will be a Russian loan, secured upon the customs and the receipts of the country. Every link in the chain of bondage is as clear as day. Russians will stream over your frontiers and settle in your cities. Everywhere Theos will have to give way to the new influence. In ten years at the most the thing will be complete. Theos will become a second Poland. Duke of Reist, you are at heart a patriot and a brave soldier, but you are no match for Domiloff in what he would call his modern diplomacy. Arrest him. His presence in the city is illegal. You have every justification. Out to the camp and take your place by the King's side. I

know something of war, and I know that your cause is far from hopeless. At least you can hold the Turks in check, and I tell you that intervention is no longer a dream. England is at this moment hesitating, and if she moves Germany will stand by her. Don't make the mistake of your life. Take down your sword, order your horses and ride with me to Solika."

It was obvious that Reist was moved. A spot of colour burned in his cheeks, and he glanced for a moment at his sister as though for guidance. She too was agitated. Brand turned to her.

"Countess," he exclaimed, "will you not add your words to mine? I come here as your friend. The King is guiltless of all offence towards you. Plead with your brother. Beg him to ride with me to the King."

She laid her hand softly upon his.

"My friend," she said, "you have spoken like a brave man and an honest man, and both my brother and I respect you very much for it. But you are a stranger here, and we are Thetians. We know our country and her needs better than you. We do not believe that Ughtred of Tyrnaus is the man to save her. He is too, what you call in the west, democratic for an ancient kingdom. The heart of the people is not with him. As for Domiloff, we do not trust wholly to him. We are not quite so blind as you would have us believe. Yet we need friends—and, believe me—we shall know how to reward them. Stay here with us, Mr. Brand. We will try to treat you so that you shall never regret it."

The upward glance of her dark eyes was eloquent enough, but Brand only shook his head.

"I am for the King," he said.

"And I," the Duke of Reist said, with a sudden vehemence, "am for my country. Mr. Brand, you are answered. You have my permission to repeat the whole of our conversation to the King. Now as to yourself. You are a brave man, and I do not care to see harm come to such. Leave this house at once. Marie will show you an exit from this side. You are in danger from which even I am powerless to protect you."

"I thank you," Brand answered, taking up his hat. "Your friend Domiloff is, I suppose, still anxious as to my whereabouts. And in all probability—here he is."

CHAPTER XLII

THERE was a sharp tap at the door. Marie and her brother exchanged quick glances. Brand stepped forward, but Marie waved him back.

"Who is there?" she called out.

"It is I, Baron Domiloff," was the suave answer. "I regret very much to intrude, but I have urgent business with your friend Mr. Brand. Can I come in?"

She hesitated. After all, any attempt to keep him out must be futile.

"You can come in," she answered.

The door opened, and Domiloff entered. He bowed low before the Countess, but there was an evil smile upon his lips when his eyes met Brand's.

"This is a very fortunate meeting, Mr. Brand," he declared. "It saves us the trouble of searching for you. Only an hour ago, my dear sir, the Countess and I were speaking of you."

"So far as the Countess was concerned," Brand answered, dryly, "I am honoured."

Domiloff shrugged his shoulders. He turned to Nicholas with a smile which was meant to be good-humoured.

"Mr. Brand imagines perhaps that I bear him some ill-will for that previous little *rencontre* between us, in which, by the bye, I must admit that I had very much

the worst of it. I can assure him most sincerely that it is not so."

Brand shrugged his shoulders.

"We have met since then, Baron Domiloff, I think," he said, "and even you must admit that a revolver bullet through one's hat is scarcely a message of good will."

Domiloff was bewildered. Was this a joke, or was his friend—his very good friend, Mr. Walter Brand—under some hallucination? Brand turned from him impatiently.

"The matter is not one which will repay discussion," he said. "Countess, I regret that I must offer you my adieux."

Domiloff held up his hand.

"One moment," he said, persuasively. "We are all three here together now, and the opportunity is too excellent to be lost. The Duke of Reist, the Countess, and I have something in common to say to you. You will spare us a few moments—and your best attention, my dear Mr. Brand."

"By all means," Brand answered. "'Something in common' to say to me sounds interesting. I am at your service."

"It concerns the daily letters which you cable from here to London on behalf of the newspaper to which you are attached," Domiloff said, slowly.

"Indeed," Brand answered. "I am flattered that you should have troubled to read them."

"From a literary point of view," Domiloff admitted, "they are admirable. Politically I regret to say that we find them mischievous."

Brand laughed scornfully.

"Perhaps you are not altogether an impartial judge," he remarked. "Will you proceed, please?"

"Those letters, I am afraid, must be discontinued," Domiloff said.

Brand stared at him.

"Don't talk rubbish," he exclaimed. "'Must be discontinued,' indeed! Why, I consider your objection to them the highest compliment which I could possibly receive. As if anything which you could say would make me alter my views."

Domiloff smiled. It was a very faint, but a very evil smile.

"It is not," he protested, "what I might say, but what I might do. I take it for granted that either the Duke of Reist or the Countess has spoken with you on this matter, and I will not therefore waste my breath. It is sufficient to tell you this! Your present attitude is harmful to what we consider the best interests of Theos. You must either undertake to send no more cables or remain here as our prisoner."

Brand glanced towards the Countess, and in his eyes there was a merciless inquisite light.

"So I am in a nest of conspirators," he remarked, dryly. "There is no longer any doubt about it. I do not know, Baron Domiloff, what magic you use to pervert honest men, but your success is certainly astounding. Now let me pass."

With a quick movement his revolver flashed out, and Domiloff was covered. Perfectly self-possessed, the Russian bowed, and stood away from the door, but

Brand reached it only to be confronted by half-a-dozen naked sabres. The landing was held by a small company of Russian soldiers.

"For the protection of the Russian Embassy," Baron Domiloff remarked, sardonically. "Now, Mr. Brand, will you put your revolver away, and listen to reason?"

Brand turned to Marie. He was white with rage.

"Countess," he demanded. "I entered this room at your invitation. Was this arranged for? Is this a trap of your setting?"

A little cry of pain broke from her lips. She recovered herself almost immediately.

"Did I know," she asked, "that you were coming?"

He was silent. In his heart he had already absolved her.

"Countess," he said, "forgive me. I spoke hastily. Duke of Reist, I appeal to you. This is your house, and I entered it openly and upon a legitimate errand. I remained here as your guest. I demand a safe conduct from it. Order that man to remove his soldiers."

Marie stepped forward.

"Nicholas," she cried, "he is right. We cannot have the Reist house turned into a nest of brigands. Baron Domiloff, these are my apartments. Your presence is an intrusion which I do not choose to tolerate. Be so good as to withdraw and take your men with you."

"My dear lady," he declared, "it is impossible."

A fierce answer trembled upon Marie's lips, but Nicholas held out his hand.

"Silence, Marie," he said. "Mr. Brand has made an appeal which it is very difficult for me to ignore. He is

under my roof, and to some extent he is entitled to my protection. But there are limits to the obligations even of hospitality. There have been things spoken of in his presence which must not be repeated."

"The safety and welfare of Theos," Domiloff said, solemnly, "must eclipse all other considerations. Mr. Brand came here of his own accord."

Reist turned to Brand.

"Are you prepared," he said, "to keep silence as to all that has transpired since you crossed the threshold of this house? I will be content with your word of honour."

"No!" Brand answered, firmly. "I cannot make any such promise."

Marie turned upon them both with flaming cheeks.

"Let the King know all," she cried. "What does it matter now? This is my house, as well as yours, Nicholas, and I say that Mr. Brand shall leave it when and how he pleases. Baron Domiloff, I order you to withdraw, and take your soldiers with you."

But Domiloff only shook his head.

"Countess," he said, "for your brother's sake and the sake of Theos I cannot do as you ask. This man's silence for a few days at least is the one thing necessary to secure our success."

"Then my silence will be the silence of death," Brand answered, fiercely. "If you will not let me pass peaceably, I shall fight my way as far as I am able. Stand away, Domiloff. You cursed spy."

Marie sprang between them. She pushed Brand back.

"Nicholas," she said, "this is not your affair. It is between Baron Domiloff and myself. You recognize that?"

"Entirely!" he answered.

"Then will you leave it in my hands?" she begged.

He hesitated for a moment, but a glance into her face reassured him.

"I am content," he said, and left them.

She turned to Domiloff.

"Baron," she said, "if you do not let Mr. Brand pass unhurt our compact is at an end."

He held up his hands in eager expostulation.

"I wish your friend no harm, Countess," he declared, "but believe me, his reports are doing us every possible injury. Besides, he will carry word of this to the King. It is impossible to let him go. I will withdraw my men if you like, while you reason with him. It is his silence only we require."

She turned to Brand.

"You hear?"

He nodded.

"My silence," he answered, "is not to be bought. The King is my friend, and his cause is mine. Apart from that it is my duty as an honest man to upset the scheming of such rogues as that," he pointed to Domiloff. "In two minutes, Countess, I shall leave this room—dead or alive."

Domiloff was very pale, but he remained calm. Marie left him and placed her hands in Brand's. She looked up into his face fondly.

"You are quite right," she said. "I honour you for your words."

Then she turned to Domiloff.

"Listen," she said. "You will permit Mr. Brand to pass uninjured, or I shall go at once to Nicholas, and tell him not only all that I know, but what I suspect. You understand me! I shall tell him—the whole truth. I go also to the King, and I tell him—the whole truth. I go also to the House of Laws, I anticipate your proclamation to them, and I announce—the whole truth. These are not empty threats. I swear to you that I will do these things."

Domiloff regarded her thoughtfully. His expression was inscrutable.

"You will not risk the success of all our plans," he said, slowly. "You will even sacrifice your country that this man may go safely. You are serious? It is in your mind that you are the Countess Marie of Reist, and he—the paid writer in an English newspaper. Forgive me that I speak of this. It is incredible."

"It is nevertheless true," she answered, firmly. "Your answer."

He bowed low.

"Mr. Walter Brand," he said, "is fortunate. He is welcome to depart."

"Wait!"

She crossed the room, and from a cedar box on the mantelshelf drew out a small shining revolver. She stood facing Domiloff.

"My friend," she said, "so I shall remain until Mr. Brand has left the house and waves to me from the street below. And if there is treachery I give you

my word that I shall fire. You have seen me use a revolver. You know that this is not play with me."

"Mr. Brand," he repeated, "is fortunate indeed."

CHAPTER XLIII

Once more the beacons flared in a long, lurid line from the mountain-tops, rockets screamed into the night, and away from south of Solika came the heavy roll of guns plainly to be heard in the anxious city. Rumours were plentiful. The Turks were already streaming through the passes! A great battle was on hand! Solika had fallen! The streets and squares of Theos were filled with an excited and restless mob, mostly composed of old men, children, and women, with a sprinkling of foreigners. The outdoor *cafés* were filled, people stood about in little knots together, talking eagerly. Up at the railway station a constant stream of refugees waited patiently for trains to take them northwards.

There were no trams running, or carriages. The Government had subsidized the horses, and most of the men had gone to the front. All night long gangs of navvies in squads were working at the fortifications by searchlight. From all the country places stores were pouring in.

Towards morning the roar of distant artillery increased, and those who listened keenly fancied that they could hear the sharper rattle of Maxims and machine-guns. Trains began to crawl in from the front full of wounded. From them something of the truth was gathered. The King had made a forced march, himself had

crossed the frontier, and fiercely attacked the Turkish army. So far all had gone well. The Turks were falling back, and had already lost two guns.

In the grey dawn Sara hastened to the hospital, which was already almost full. The regular nurses were out at the front, and their places were mostly taken by volunteers—the suggestion having come from Sara herself. Everywhere the news was being eagerly discussed. Solika was being turned into a military base. At Althea the position had been so strengthened as to be now impregnable. The King was the idol of his army, and the military fever burned fiercely.

At midday, news! A telegram from Solika announced that the King was returning across the frontier, having completely scattered the Turkish army, inflicted great loss upon them, and captured four guns. The Town Master caused a copy of the telegram to be posted in the market-place, and the bells of the Cathedral were rung. Later on it was whispered about that the victory had come very near being turned into total and irredeemable disaster. For the Thetians, chasing the flying Turks through a difficult country, were suddenly met by an unexpected rally, and stretching on both sides of them like a gigantic crescent was a great army of reinforcements. With great skill Ughtred had extricated his army, and regained the shelter of Solika. But the joy of their victory was damped. The enemy were in strength which seemed absolutely overwhelming.

Towards afternoon there came shouts from the railway station. Through the crowd, which gave him clear passage, cheering vigorously, Ughtred was driven towards

the palace. He looked pale and dishevelled, and his uniform showed that he had not been an idle spectator of the fighting. He waved his hand affectionately to the crowd, but was clearly preoccupied. At the palace he sent for his State Secretary and Mr. Thexis, the leader of the Government party in the House of Laws. An informal Council meeting was summoned, and hastily attended by the leading members of the House.

* * * * * *

An hour afterwards Sara was summoned from the midst of her work at the hospital by an urgent note. At the Villa she found Ughtred waiting for her.

"You," she cried, softly. "How dare you fetch me away from my work?"

Then, as a clearer impression of his appearance came to her, standing in the white noonday sunshine, she became anxious.

"You are not hurt?" she cried. "Nothing has gone amiss?"

He tightened his clasp upon her hands.

"Hurt, no! I took too great care of myself. We have won our first battle, too, Sara. My men fought splendidly."

She nodded.

"At the hospital," she said, "even the badly wounded are full of enthusiasm. Tell me! You have more news, have you not?"

He nodded.

"We crossed the border in pursuit," he said, "and we saw with our own eyes what the scouts who are

coming in continually report. The whole of the Turkish army has been mobilized, and is being massed upon our borders. That is to say, two hundred thousand of the finest soldiers in the world are almost at our gates. All told, we number sixteen thousand."

The tears stood in her eyes. She pressed his hands silently.

"I'm afraid I don't understand these things," she said, "but an unprovoked attack like this seems like a return to ancient history. It is barbarous. Can you not appeal to the Powers?"

"That I have done," he answered, sadly, "but you must remember that this is the fruit of Russia's intrigue. Turkey is only a catspaw. She holds France, of course, and the eternal policy of Germany is to keep friends with Russia. There is only England."

"England," she cried, hopefully. "Why you are half English yourself. England will surely interfere."

"It is a great deal to ask," he answered, seriously. "My friendship can be of little account to her, and it is asking her to risk a war for the sake of an abstract principle. Diplomatically, England would be very unwise to interfere. As a great and generous country I have appealed to her. But, Sara, I have little hope."

"And if she does not?"

"If she does not I shall put the issue plainly before my people. If they prefer a glorious death to serfdom, I too, being of their mind, shall fight till this war becomes a massacre."

She smiled at him bravely.

"Europe will never permit it, dear," she said. "It

would be too terrible. See, I have faith in your destiny —and my luck. I am not even afraid."

The courtyard rang with the sound of hoofs. A messenger from the telegraph corps entered at the King's summons.

"Your Majesty," he announced, "I have to announce that an hour ago a trainload of Cossacks, numbering about five hundred, arrived at the frontier and demanded permission to continue their journey to Theos. Captain Operman, in accordance with your instructions, demanded their passport. They had none to give, but their colonel produced papers which contained their route to Theos for the protection of the Russian Embassy there. In further accordance with your Majesty's instructions, Captain Operman then replied that Theos was in a perfectly peaceful state, and the Russian Embassy was amply protected by its flag from both belligerents. The colonel in command of the Cossacks replied that his orders were absolute to proceed to Theos, and he had no alternative but to obey them. Captain Operman replied that his orders too were absolute, and he could not permit an armed body of men to cross the frontier. In reply to this the Russians were ordered to at once entrain. Captain Operman once more protested, and announced, according to your Majesty's instructions, that any further advance on the part of the Cossacks would constitute an invasion and be recognized as an act of war. There being no reply to this, your Majesty's instructions were successfully carried out to the letter."

"Tell me exactly what happened," Ughtred asked.

"The whole of the rolling-stock available was blown up and the railway line destroyed beyond the possibility of immediate repair at a dozen places. I regret to add that several of the Cossacks were slightly injured by the explosion."

"And is there any message from Captain Operman with reference to horses?" Ughtred asked.

"In this direction also," the messenger replied, "your Majesty's instructions have been carefully carried out. The country has been absolutely denuded of horses. It will be impossible for the Russians to obtain more than a dozen at the outside."

"Captain Operman has carried out my instructions faithfully and well," Ughtred replied.

The messenger bowed.

"I was further desired to report, your Majesty," he added, "that word has just arrived that a series of explosions have occurred at different points along the line on the other side of the frontier. Captain Operman makes no report to your Majesty concerning these, but he desires me to say that their effect will be to retard all communication with Russia for several days at least."

The King smiled.

"I am well served indeed," he said. "What has become of the Cossacks?"

"They are quartered at the station buildings, your Majesty. There is no stock of provisions whatever in the vicinity, and in case they should attempt to march to Theos all the farms *en route* have been warned to remove their cattle and stores."

"You will present my compliments and thanks to

Captain Operman," the King said, "and you will congratulate him on the success and spirit with which he has carried out my orders. Further, you will request him to report himself to me at headquarters at the earliest possible opportunity."

The messenger bowed and withdrew. Ughtred rose and paced the room thoughtfully.

"I expected this move of Domiloff's," he said, looking towards Sara. "You see Theos itself is in a queer state. Every honest man who can bear arms is at the front. There remain in the city only a horde of Russian Jews, who I suspect have been drafted in a few at a time, and are only waiting a signal from Domiloff to begin rioting."

He touched a bell.

"Let me speak to Mr. Ruttens," he ordered. "He was in the ante-room a few minutes ago."

"What are you going to do?" Sara asked.

"I am going to try and arrest Domiloff," he answered. "I fear that it is quite useless, but an attempt must be made. There will be some mischief before long if he is left alone."

Sara rose up and came to his side.

"There are other traitors in the city besides Domiloff," she said, "if what they are saying is true."

A deeper shadow fell upon the King's face.

"You mean the Reists?"

"It is common report."

"Nicholas of Reist has withdrawn his allegiance to me," Ughtred said. "Yet I do not believe that he would be concerned in anything absolutely traitorous.

As for the Countess—I fear that I have incurred her ill-will. She is friendly too, they say, with Domiloff. I cannot see though what mischief she can do. Ruttens," he added, turning towards the door, "are there sufficient police left in Theos to effect the arrest of one man?"

Ruttens, grey-bearded, long since a pensioner, saluted the King respectfully.

"Your Majesty," he answered, "it depends upon the man."

"The man is Baron Domiloff!"

Ruttens shook his head.

"Your Majesty," he said, "we can make the attempt. Yesterday it would have been possible enough. But last night half the veterans and weaklings who have been enrolled as special police deserted."

"Deserted!" the King exclaimed, frowning.

Ruttens smiled.

"Deserted in order to make their way to the front, your Majesty. Old Kennestoff, who is eighty years old, got out his rifle and went, and a dozen more well nigh his age. I myself ——"

He hesitated. The King's face had cleared.

"You had my orders, Ruttens, and my special commission. A few good men we must have in Theos."

"There are rascals enough, your Majesty," Ruttens said, with grave face. "There are a good many aliens, too, whose presence here I cannot understand. They pay their way, and hang round the squares in little groups, always whispering to themselves. They call themselves farmers and shopkeepers from the frontier, but there is little of the Thetian in their faces to my

mind. The city were healthier cleared of them, your Majesty."

The King smiled bitterly.

"But how, my good Ruttens?" he exclaimed. "You and your few veterans would be powerless against them."

Ruttens sighed.

"It is true, your Majesty," he answered. "To be frank, I have put them down in my mind as creatures of Domiloff. And though to-day I will endeavour to effect his arrest I fear very much that he is well guarded against anything of the sort."

Once more the courtyard rang with the clatter of hoofs. There was commotion below and in the palace.

"It is word from the front," the King cried.

The messenger stood before him.

"Your Majesty," he announced, "General Dartnoff has telegraphed that he is engaged. He adds that there seems to be some extensive movement preparing."

Ughtred tore himself away. Sara choked back a sob, and held out both her hands. At the moment of parting they were alone.

"Good-bye, dear," she whispered. "Do your best and have faith. I am not afraid for you or for Theos."

He kissed her and galloped away, followed by his few attendants. Her cheerfulness was inspiring. His heart swelled with pride at the thought of her. She had destroyed forever his lingering superstition as to the obligations of race—she a daughter of the democracy with the heart and courage of a queen. Ughtred had passed through his one hour of weakness. As the

engine with its one solitary carriage tore across the plain to Solika a new and finer hopefulness was born in him. Her words and her steadfast optimism had fired his blood. He would fight his country's enemy so that for very shame Europe should cry "Hold!"

CHAPTER XLIV

In his room, with heavy curtains closely drawn across the barred windows to keep from his ears the distant mutterings of the guns, Nicholas of Reist sat in torment. From below in the square he had heard the people's farewell to the King as he had hastened back to the scene of action—the echoes of the city's varying moods floated up to him from hour to hour. And whilst all was activity, ceaseless, restless, he alone of the men of Theos sat idle, his hands before him, waiting for he knew not what. It was indeed torment. The blood of his fighting forefathers was burning in his veins. To linger here in miserable inaction whilst the war music throbbed in his ears was like torture to him. Even Domiloff had found it best for the last few days to leave him alone. Besides, Domiloff was busy.

In a small room at the back of the house the Russian was receiving a visitor. Before the door were half-a-dozen soldiers, and the bolts were closely drawn. Yet even then the conversation between the two men was tense and nervous.

"To have ventured here yourself," Domiloff said, drawing the shade more closely over the lamp, "seems to me, my dear Hassen, a little like bravado. You hold the wits of this people a little too cheaply. I am not yet strong enough to protect you. If you are recognized you will be shot at sight."

"One runs risks always," the other answered carelessly, "and besides it is your fault that I am here. Your inaction is unaccountable. There has been no message from you for three days. I am afraid that you are bungling matters."

"And you—what of you?" the other answered, hotly. "What were your men doing at Solika to be driven back by a handful of half-trained farmers? I expected the Turks at Theos to-day, and all would have been well. Yet with eighty thousand men you do nothing. You too who have boasted of your soldiers and your artillery as the equal of any in Europe."

The visitor shrugged his shoulders.

"Domiloff," he said, "you are irritated and nervous. Be careful what you say. I admit that so far we have been checked, but it is not sense to talk of half-trained farmers. Ughtred of Tyrnaus is a fine soldier. Mind, I was with him in Egypt, and he had a sound training there. His dispositions against attack are excellent. He has evidently been thinking them out since first he came here. Then you told us that he had no modern artillery at all."

"He had not, then," Domiloff answered. "These batteries were a present from a rich fool of an American or his daughter."

"The fair Sara Van Decht! I heard that she was here."

"You know her?"

"She visited at Colonel Erlito's in London," Hassen answered. "So did I. But that is of no consequence. You very well know that we relied upon your help to

finish this campaign quickly. So far you have done nothing. Perhaps you do not understand the reason for haste. Let me tell you this. Even now the message is before the Sultan waiting for his signature which will recall the troops and bring the invasion to an end."

"Gorteneff is in Constantinople himself," Domiloff answered. "He will not allow it to be signed."

"Gorteneff! So is Sir Henry White in Constantinople. You seem to forget that."

Domiloff's face was black.

"White! The Englishman! Bah! You will not tell me that your master fears the English any more. Their day is over. They have no longer a place amongst the Powers."

Hassen smiled.

"You exaggerate," he said. "England is the only country in Europe at least who could bring our master's palace about his ears in twenty-four hours, and make beautiful Constantinople a heap of blackened ruins. No, no, Domiloff. My master is wishful to serve you. We are here—so far we have done all the work—it is for your aid now we ask. That is only fair. You do not seem to understand the real reason for haste. I know that at any moment the protest which White has already presented may be followed by an ultimatum."

"And your master would regard it?"

"I am very sure that he would," Hassen answered, promptly. "It is not worth while attempting to deceive you. If England is really no longer a country worthy of consideration, fight her yourself. I am very sure that we shall not. And you must remember this, Domiloff,

the agitation throughout England in favour of Theos is fed day by day with letters from this very city. The writer must be with you all the time. Yet you permit him to continue—you with your unscrupulousness and your secret agents. England's intervention, if she does intervene, is entirely your fault."

"Damn that fellow," Domiloff muttered through his teeth.

"You know who it is!" Hassen exclaimed.

"Yes!"

"And you permit him to continue? You have made no effort to close his mouth?"

"Oh, I have tried," Domiloff answered, hastily. "He is an Englishman, and he cannot be bought. He will not listen to reason. And so far as regards other means we have been unfortunate. He has a hat with two bullet holes in it."

Hassen caught up his hat.

"Oh, I think that it is of no use my staying here," he said. "The Domiloff I have heard of and used to know is not any more in existence. That is very certain. You have let the man write these letters day by day; you have had him within the city all this time, and all that you can tell me is that 'he has a hat with two bullet holes in,' 'you have been unfortunate.' Bah! The man who makes history is not the man who fails in a trifle like that."

Domiloff ground his teeth together, but he kept his temper.

"My friend," he said, "that is all very well. But you do not understand everything. This man is the lover of

the Countess of Reist. Any hurt to him would be a mortal affront to her."

"Cannot she make him hold his tongue?" Hassen asked. "If he is her lover she should surely be able to bring him to our side. The girl is pretty enough. Surely the Englishman is not a Joseph?"

"He is English, and that is worse," Domiloff answered. "But this very day we caught him here in this house. She appealed to him—offered him every inducement, implored him to cease those letters. His obstinacy was amazing. Neither my threats nor her prayers and promises availed. I ordered him to be seized, and then what must she do but turn round and swear that if he were touched she would go to the King—and she would have done it."

"So he got away?"

"He got away."

Hassen groaned.

"Domiloff," he said, "it is farewell. I do not come again. Our compact is at an end. You are getting old, Domiloff. The days at Stamboul are long past. 'He got away.' A change like this in a man is marvellous."

Domiloff stood before the door. He was very pale, and his face was not pleasant to look upon.

"Stay where you are, Hassen," he said. "You have come here, it seems, to reproach me for inaction, for not having helped you sufficiently from within the city. Well, it is possible that I have relied too much upon the result of your coming into touch with the Thetians. I expected your army here before this, Hassen. However,

you did not come here only to complain, eh? You have a suggestion perhaps. Well, let me hear it. As for the Englishman, I will risk the anger of Marie of Reist. He shall not write another letter. Now what beyond that? I am ready. The city is full of my agents. If only I were to give the word, Hassen, you would never leave the city alive."

Hassen laughed scornfully.

"I have passed through the Thetian lines," he said, "and made my way alone here, so it is not likely that death could come nearer to me than this. But, Domiloff, you talk now more like a man. I will admit that what you said is truth. I have come here with a scheme in mind, and it is a good scheme."

"Then waste no more time," Domiloff said, quickly, "go on."

"There is in it," Hassen said, "a personal element. In truth my master has disappointed me in this campaign. I should have been given the entire command, and instead I have only a corps. Now I am stationed, as you know, not at Solika, but at Althea. Therefore, it is my men whom I would like to bring into Theos whilst Mellet Pascha, who has my place, is still held back at Solika."

Domiloff nodded.

"That is reasonable," he said, "but the Althea passes are impregnable. I do not think that they can be taken by assault at all."

"Nor I," Hassen answered, dryly. "I want a safe conduct through them."

Domiloff looked up quickly.

"I see. But Klipper, who is in command there, is incorruptible."

"Klipper must be removed then. Now what about the Duke of Reist, Domiloff? He is on our side, is he not?"

"He is on our side," Domiloff answered, slowly, "but unfortunately he has quarrelled with the King. He is in the house at this moment."

"Quarrelled? What folly. Domiloff, you seem to have bungled everything you have touched lately. What is the good of Reist to us when he sits here sulking?"

"The good of him," Domiloff repeated. "Why he is to be our puppet King—for a month or so. He is simply invaluable. Besides, his absence from the army has set people talking about the King. It has created dissatisfaction."

"That is all very well, Domiloff," Hassen said, "but have you ever considered how very much more useful Reist would be to us if he were outwardly on friendly terms with the King, near him now and at the head of his men—and all the time ours?"

"It is without doubt true, but you do not know Nicholas of Reist," Domiloff said, dryly. "He is not of the stuff from which conspirators are fashioned. This quarrel with the King has cost me endless trouble. He would never play a traitor's part, as he would call it, secretly."

Hassen smiled grimly.

"Listen, Domiloff," he said. "If Nicholas of Reist were to go to the King and hold out his hand, and beg his pardon, would the King receive him?"

"Of course."

"Would he give him the command at Althea if he were to ask for it?"

"Without a doubt."

"Then he must ask for it and get it. Then I will talk to him if you find him so difficult. These are not times for neutrality. He must be for the King or against the King. With the Althean passes unguarded for an hour the thing is done. Then there can be as much intervention as you like. Theos will be ours."

Domiloff stood silent, with knitted brows and downcast eyes.

"The scheme is good," he said, "but I fear very much whether Reist will consent."

"He will have to," Hassen answered, coolly. "He is your man, is he not? He has already committed himself too deeply to draw back. You can show him that it is for the salvation of Theos."

"You shall show him yourself," Domiloff answered. "I will take you to him. You will understand then the mood of the man with whom we have to deal."

Hassen held up his hand.

"You forget," he said. "The Duke of Reist and I are ancient enemies. I was in command when we raided the frontier ten years ago. Perhaps my men were a little rough to their prisoners—I forget the circumstances now, but there was trouble between us."

Domiloff shrugged his shoulders.

"So was I his enemy a short time ago," he answered. "It is barely a month since the name of a Russian was like poison to him. But those things are forgotten now.

Reist is ours—absolutely. Our friends must be his friends, and our enemies his. So I shall take you to him. Believe me, it will be best."

Even then Hassen hesitated. The memory of Reist's outburst in London was still before him. But Domiloff had already opened the door.

"Come," he said, softly, "I know that Reist is alone."

CHAPTER XLV

It seemed to Reist that this was the supreme moment of his indignity. He stood before the two men, white-faced, hollow-eyed, speechless. And Marie, who had joined their councils, watched him anxiously.

"Nicholas," she said, "this may sound to you a terrible thing. Indeed, I myself wish that there were another way. But there are many things to be considered. It will save bloodshed, and it will end the war. With Theos lost, Ughtred and the Solika army must surrender. After that ——"

"Aye, after that," Reist interrupted, fiercely. "Let me hear what Domiloff has to say. After that!"

"The rest is simplicity itself," Domiloff said, coolly. "A meeting of the House of Laws shall be called, and the Turkish army shall be withdrawn across the frontier. Sentence of banishment shall be passed upon Ughtred of Tyrnaus, and you, Nicholas of Reist, shall be proclaimed King. Then there shall be peace in Theos—peace, and I hope, prosperity. We have gone over all this before, Reist. You must trust us. Our alliance is useless if every few minutes you lose faith."

"A passive treason was all that I promised," Reist said. "I undertook to break with the King, to give up my command in the army, and remain here. Nothing more! Surely that is enough for my share!"

"Under ordinary circumstances it would have been

enough," Hassen said, "but in one or two instances the unexpected has intervened. This Englishman, whom you all seemed to have welcomed amongst you, has been indeed a firebrand. His letters have been read everywhere. In England they have done terrible mischief. In Germany, too, they have made trouble. We have therefore to end this matter swiftly—with one coup. We cannot now wait for the inevitable end. From your point of view, Duke, surely this is better so. The prosecution of this war would simply mean a devastated and depopulated Theos. Unless Ughtred of Tyrnaus surrendered quickly the bloodshed would be terrible, the end of course certain. Surely what we propose is the better way. You, Duke of Reist, who are a Thetian and a patriot, must ——"

"Stop!'

A sudden fire burst in Reist's dark eyes, the deep colour rushed into his cheeks. There was a breathless silence in the little room.

"Not that word," he said, slowly. "For God's sake not that word. I do not know what I am, or what men will call me when these terrible days have passed away. But the patriots are those who wait with Ughtred of Tyrnaus to give their lives for their country, those whose swords are unsheathed, and whose heart is stout for battle. I, who spend my gloomy days here, striving to keep the sound of those guns from my ears, skulking in the shadows, afraid even to show my face at the window—I am no patriot."

"The Duke of Reist does himself an injustice," Domiloff said, softly. "It is physical courage which

fills a man's heart with the desire to fight—a greater thing than this is the moral courage which keeps a brave man inactive when he knows in his heart that inaction is best for his country."

"Oh, you are a subtle reasoner, Domiloff," Reist said, bitterly. "I cannot argue with you. Only I know that all Theos is standing sword in hand before our ancient enemies, and I am here. The weariness of it is intolerable."

"It is the nerves, my friend," Domiloff answered, cheerfully. "You need a good gallop, a little of this stinging air. Well, what we need of you is action, is it not?—and there is danger too."

"It goes beyond our bargain," Reist answered, in an agitated tone. "Once I never dreamed that you, Hassen, would pass the threshold of my door and leave it alive. As for such a thing as you ask—oh, I am not Judas enough for that."

"Nicholas," his sister said, quickly, "can you not see that it is a great deed. Think how many lives you will save. In years to come every woman of Theos who sees her husband by her side will remember that you were his preserver. Besides, it is too late now for hesitation. We have chosen our side, and we must work for our cause."

Domiloff nodded.

"The Countess is right," he said. "Do as we ask, Nicholas of Reist, and in a fortnight's time there will be no war or sign of war, and the people shall know to whom they owe their deliverance."

Reist smiled bitterly.

"My people," he said, "will never overwhelm me with gratitude. You do not know them as I do. A true Thetian would love best the man who led them into the jaws of death to fight for his liberty, even though the fight were in vain, than the man who made all things smooth and happy for him by skulking within four walls and intriguing with such men as you, Domiloff."

Hassen turned impatiently away.

"My friend," he said to Domiloff, "we waste our time here. Theos must take its chance. I am not disposed to wait any longer for the Duke of Reist's answer."

"Then you shall have it now," Reist said, facing them with a momentary reassertion of his old self. "I accept. In an hour I will ride out to Solika. But I shall do this thing my own way. Tell me only how I can communicate with you at Althea."

"It is easy," Hassen exclaimed. "I will explain."

He drew Reist on one side. The Countess and Domiloff exchanged quick glances. Then there came suddenly from below the sound of a measured tramping of feet in the square, halting before the great mail-studded door. Marie moved swiftly to the window.

"It is Ruttens," she announced, hurriedly, "the temporary commander of police. He has forty or fifty men with him, and they have formed a cordon around the door."

Hassen's hand flew to his sword. He looked towards Domiloff.

"What does this mean?" he exclaimed. "Have we been betrayed, Domiloff?"

"It is not you they seek," he said. "Reist, find out what they want."

There was the sound of heavy footsteps upon the stairs. Marie sprang towards the door, but she was too late. A servant had already thrown it open.

"Colonel Ruttens," he announced.

Domiloff, already stealing to the furthermost corner of the room, which was a large one, extinguished the solitary lamp and plunged the whole place into comparative darkness. Ruttens paused a few yards from the threshold and peered around him.

"Is the Duke of Reist here?" he asked.

Nicholas struck a match and lit a solitary candle. Its feeble flame did little more than reveal his own pale face.

"Here I am, Colonel Ruttens. What do you want with me?"

Colonel Ruttens saluted.

"With you—nothing, Duke," he answered. "Nothing, save your help, that is, in arresting a miscreant."

"Who is he?" Reist asked.

"The Baron Domiloff."

"He is a Russian subject," Reist said, slowly.

"I have a warrant for his arrest signed by the King," Ruttens answered. "Russian or no Russian he has been guilty of inciting to treason, of conspiring to bring a regiment of Cossacks into the city, and of using firearms in the street. Apart from which his very presence in the city is an offence, as he was banished by the King some time ago."

"And why do you come to me?" Reist asked.

"Because Baron Domiloff is at present in this house,'

Ruttens answered. "My men have surrounded it, and I have come first to you, Duke. I call upon you, as a loyal Thetian, to aid me in making this arrest."

"What right have you to assume that I should give shelter to Baron Domiloff?" Reist asked, quietly.

"I regret to say that he is known to be in this house," Ruttens answered. "Further, the fact that you, Duke, were also known to be here when every loyal Thetian is under arms, compelled me to assume that your attitude towards this Russian spy was not inimical."

Reist started as though struck. Immediately afterwards Ruttens' attention was attracted by the sound of stealthy footsteps in the further corner of the apartment. He half drew his sword and peered forward.

"Who is that?" he asked. "Duke of Reist, I have spared you the indignity of filling your house with police, but I must call upon you at once to hand over my prisoner. If not I shall summon my men. I have only to——"

He was powerless to utter another syllable. A strong pair of arms were around his neck, and a handkerchief thrust into his mouth. He only looked towards Reist, but the look was such that Reist felt the shameful colour flood his cheeks.

Hassen's dagger gleamed blue in the twilight, but Reist held out his hand.

"Listen," he said, "bind and gag him, and then escape by the western entrance. But no violence. He is an old man."

Hassen shrugged his shoulders, but Domiloff hastened to assent.

"There is no need to hurt him," he said. "Keep him here quietly for a while. I will order my men into the hall in case that motley crew below try to force an entrance. Countess, will you be showing our friend the way to the western exit? Reist, you must watch this man."

They hurried away. Reist stood quite still for a moment. His heart was thumping against his side. He bent over Ruttens and lifted the gag from his mouth.

"What was the signal to your men that they should follow you?" he whispered.

Ruttens caught his breath for a moment.

"A—broken window."

Reist seized a paper-weight from his table and dashed it through the nearest pane. The glass fell with a crash into the street below. There was an answering shout and a rush of feet. Domiloff rushed breathless in.

"What has happened?" he exclaimed.

"A stone thrown from the street below," he answered. "Quick, Domiloff, and escape. They are streaming in below. Why, they are fighting already."

Domiloff was pale with fear, but he forced a smile.

"I have friends in the city," he said. "They will not see me taken. Farewell, Reist! Remember!"

He hastened from the room. Reist stooped down and cut the cords which held Ruttens.

"Listen, Ruttens," he said. "I have plans of my own for saving Theos, and unfortunately Domiloff has been concerned in them. But that is over. You know the western entrance? He leaves by that. Quick!"

Ruttens staggered from the room. Already the sound of firearms rang out from the hall below.

CHAPTER XLVI

"This is life," Brand said, blithely, as he leaped from his steaming horse.

"And death," Ughtred answered, gravely. "God grant that Theos may not know many days such as this."

Brand fixed his field-glasses and swept the scene below.

"Enemy advancing crescent shape in loose formation," he remarked. "Your men capitally entrenched. Masked guns, too, and cavalry in reserve. Your Majesty, how long have they been shelling the trenches?"

"All day," Ughtred answered, with a faint smile. "Our losses are less than fifty wounded. This is their second advance. The first cost them a thousand men."

An A. D. C. galloped up the hill with a report. Ughtred gave a few rapid orders and retired for a few minutes to consult with his officers. Below, the din of battle grew louder. Through the films of smoke multitudes of grey uniformed men could be seen creeping across the plain like ants, now hesitating and dropping, now running on from shelter to shelter. To Brand they seemed as numberless as the pebbles on the seashore. His face grew grave as he saw how near they were to the long zigzag line of entrenchments. The Thetian firing, too, had certainly slackened. A hor-

rible idea flashed into his brain. If the weakening fire were due to lack of ammunition Theos was doomed.

He looked around. Ughtred and his staff were specks in the distance. They were hastening down to be nearer the scene of action. Brand caught his horse, and galloped after them. The battle fever seemed to be in the atmosphere. The afternoon heat was rendered more oppressive by a murky vapour rising from the valley. Below, it was difficult to see anything save the swarm of Turks creeping steadily on across the plain. Above their heads screamed the shells which were to pave the way for their advance. Brand hastened on, filled with misgivings.

At last he reached a spur of the hill from which an easy descent led down into the valley. From here he could see into the trenches, and his spirits revived. They were swarming with men, there were no signs of any panic. The King and his staff had halted almost within shouting distance, and protected from the enemy's fire only by a little clump of trees. Then Brand knew that there was method in this silence.

A long, clarion-like bugle-call, and then—a sudden upheaval of all the forces of destruction. From the heights above the pom-poms and Maxims sent down a murderous rain, the trenches from end to end belched forth red fire. Brand held his breath, it was an epoch—for a looker-on a marvellous experience—a page in the chapter of his life. The firing-line of the Turks was within four hundred yards of the trenches, and in thirty seconds they were wiped out of existence. The next line and the next shared the same fate. The Turkish

officers galloped to the front with drawn sabres, the Mohammedan battle-cry, solemn and inspiring, rang fiercely out. It was useless. No living thing could face that zone of destruction. A dust rose from the bullet-riven ground. It was like a hail-storm upon an ocean. The Turks wavered and broke, and the Thetian cavalry rode them through and through, passing out of their broken ranks with blood-stained sabres and hearts aflame.

Ughtred, watching, saw the first signs of danger, and signalled for their withdrawal. But the lust of blood was awake in them, and they were drunk with the joy of fighting. They followed and followed till the Turks, out of that awful avalanche of death, became conscious that a thousand Thetian horsemen were not an invincible force. Their fight was checked, they were almost immediately surrounded, their leader fell shot through the heart, and a miracle was required to save the flower of the Thetian army.

A miracle which happened. For of a sudden a horseman, who had ridden in the ranks, his face shaded by a helmet, leaped to the front.

"A Reist! A Reist!" he cried, "for God and Theos," and once more the fear of numbers passed away. They fought like heroes, and in the mêlée without serious loss. They fought their way almost to the open, and their path was an avenue of blood. But how it might have gone with them no man could tell, for at the critical moment the whole cavalry reserve, with Ughtred himself at their head, fell upon the enemy's right flank, and the triumph of the day was as-

sured. The Turks fled, and no further pursuit was attempted.

The man who had led that wonderful rally rode slowly back to his place in the ranks. But Ughtred, from whose left temple the blood was streaming, and whose arm was helpless, put his horse to the gallop and intercepted him.

"It was well done, Duke of Reist," he said. "Will you shake hands with me?"

For a moment Reist hesitated, and in that moment the King, stung by his indecision, withdrew his appeal.

"I will not have a grudging reconciliation," he said. "As we are, so we will remain until your apology is ready. But I am glad at least to see that you are still a patriot. I cannot have you fighting in the ranks, Duke of Reist. What post will you have?"

Reist stood very still for a moment, and the pallor on his cheeks was more than the pallor of exhaustion.

"Your Majesty," he said, "there is a report that General Kolashin is wounded. Send me to Althea."

The King turned his horse.

"As you will," he answered. "Captain Hartzan, ride with the Duke of Reist to Althea, and take this ring to General Kolashin, whose command the Duke of Reist will take over."

Then the King, flushed with fighting, the blood indeed still upon his face from a wound on the temple, rode slowly down the lines of his army. From far and near the men of Theos greeted him lustily. This was indeed a born leader, whose dispositions had prevailed against the wily Turkish generals, and whose personal

valour they had, with their own eyes, beheld. Even from Solika, far in the background, came an answering echo to that strange thunder of men's rapturous voices.

Brand touched him on the arm.

"Your Majesty," he said, "you have won a victory to-day which will amaze all Europe. Be careful that you do not lose what you have gained by treachery!"

The King looked into Brand's grave face, and beckoned him on one side.

"Well?"

"Domiloff has got hold of Reist," he said. "He is a traitor. There is something going on in the city even now, which I do not understand."

The King shook his head gravely.

"Reist is my personal enemy," he said, "but Theos has no more faithful son. It is he who has just saved our victory from being turned into disaster."

"Nevertheless," Brand answered, "he is Domiloff's man, and there is treachery afoot. I will tell you what happened to me in the city."

The King listened with darkening face. But when Brand had finished his story he shook his head again.

"Domiloff is my enemy," he said, "and it may be the Countess of Reist. But of Reist himself I will believe no such thing."

"Your Majesty will regret it," Brand remarked, dryly.

"If you are right, I certainly shall," the King answered, "for I have appointed Reist to the command at Althea."

Brand wheeled his horse round.

"I wish you good fortune—and good-bye," he said.

The King looked at him in amazement.

"Where are you going, Brand?" he asked.

"Home."

"Home! Why?"

"The war is over," Brand answered. "The Turks will occupy Theos to-morrow."

"You are talking nonsense," Ughtred declared, hotly.

Brand shook his head.

"Your Majesty," he said, "you will admit that a traitor at Althea can let the Turks into Theos."

The King frowned.

"It is true," he admitted, "but Reist is no traitor."

"If you will come with me to the city," Brand answered, "I will prove to you that he is!"

CHAPTER XLVII

"BARON DOMILOFF! It is I, Marie of Reist. Let me in."

She stepped into the darkened room, and closed the door behind her. Domiloff, who was looking white and scared, turned the key in the lock and faced her nervously.

"Why have you come here, Countess?" he exclaimed. "Do you not understand that I am in hiding? It is not a fit place for you—and you may have been followed."

She held her handkerchief to her face and looked around her in disgust.

"You are right," she answered. "It is not a fit place for any one. It is abominable. What are you doing here?"

"The King and this Englishman Brand are in the city together, and they have scent of how things are going," he answered. "My house in the avenue was surrounded by soldiers this morning, but I managed to give them the slip and reach here safely. Have you brought me word from Nicholas?"

She shook her head.

"No!"

"Then why are you here? This place is of evil repute. Besides, it is not safe. You may have been followed."

"I believe that I was," she answered. "It is not of any consequence. There is not any one in Theos who would harm a Reist."

His face was unnaturally white. She looked at him in wonder. Was the man a coward?

"But it was madness!" he exclaimed, angrily. "There are spies everywhere. Your brother and I were overheard talking together at this very place. I may be arrested at any moment."

She glanced at him contemptuously.

"I suppose that when one conspires," she said, "there is always danger. Baron Domiloff, I have followed you here because since noon yesterday there have been two attempts upon the life of the Englishman, Walter Brand."

"Both bungled," he remarked. "One is ill served, so far from home."

She turned upon him fiercely.

"Have you forgotten what I told you only a few days ago?"

"One does not remember too long," he answered, lightly, "the words of an angry woman."

Her eyes flashed upon him wrathfully. The odour of the violets at her bosom seemed to fill the dark, stuffy room. He remarked suddenly how beautiful she was.

"If you do not know when a woman is in earnest," she declared, "you are a fool. I have come to tell you this. That the moment evil happens to him I go at once to the King. I tell him everything. Mind, this is no idle threat. I swear to you that I will do this."

A cloud of evil passions swept up from the man's

heart. He drew a little closer to her and took up his stand nearer the door.

"It is folly," he said, in a low tone, "the man is working up all Europe with his accursed letters. He must be removed."

"If evil comes to him," she said, steadily, "the King shall know all."

He drew a little closer to her. An ugly smile curved his lips.

"It cannot be, Countess, that your interest in this fellow is personal. He is not of your order. You would not be so cruel as to bestow upon him a consideration which you deny to your equals!"

"It seems to me," she said, calmly, "that you are trying to be impertinent. The nature of my interest in Mr. Brand can be no concern of yours. It is sufficient that what I have said I mean!"

"I do not find it sufficient," he answered, quietly.

She turned upon him haughtily. Her delicate eyebrows were drawn together. Her eyes were aglow with anger. Domiloff watched her stealthily. Why had he never realized how handsome she was? He drew a little nearer to her.

"What do you mean?" she demanded. "Insolent!"

"Countess," he answered, "it is very strange to me that you should so long have been ignorant of the truth. Do you think that it is for the sake of Theos I have planned for the overthrow of Ughtred of Tyrnaus? Do you think that it is for your brother's sake that I have smoothed his way to the throne? No! My reward

has always been clear before me. I have looked for it always at your hands."

"At my hands?"

He winced before the amazed scorn of her words. Yet he continued steadily.

"If you are surprised, Countess," he said, "well, I have been the victim of that time-worn fallacy which ascribes to any woman at any time the knowledge of being loved. You have always been the object of my respectful admiration. You are now ——"

She threw out her hands—a silencing gesture.

"Enough!" she exclaimed. "I do not know what you are going to say. I do not wish to hear it."

"You must!" he declared. "You shall hear me!"

She turned her back upon him, but he was between her and the door. He turned the key in the lock, and faced her—a new Domiloff, wolf-like, with evil things in his white face and black eyes.

"You shall promise to be my wife," he said, "or ——"

"Or what?"

She did not quail. His eyes fell before hers. But the key slipped into his pocket.

"Or you do not leave this house," he answered. "I am master here. The whole quarter is Russian. Be reasonable, Countess. The alliance is worthy of your consideration."

She leaned suddenly forward, and struck him across the cheek.

"You cur," she cried. "I would as soon marry one of my servants."

She beat upon the door and called out. Domiloff

drew out his handkerchief and held it to his cheek. He made no effort to silence her. There was a dull red mark across his face. If she could have seen his expression she would have been frightened.

There came no answer to her calling. She rushed across to the window. There were men on the place below, but they only answered her frantic gestures with dull indifference—at most with a shrug of the shoulders and a smile. They were Russian Jews. It was as Domiloff had said. They were his creatures. It was the one evil spot in Theos. Domiloff stood with his back to her, still with his handkerchief to his face.

She turned upon him fiercely.

"If you do not let me out," she cried, "Nicholas shall shoot you like a dog."

"It may be," he answered, coolly, "that I shall shoot Nicholas. At least there will be something to be wiped out between us. I shall not fear his vengeance."

"What do you mean?" she asked, suddenly cold with the first sensations of fear. The man's quietness was ominous, and she could see his face now. He put his handkerchief away and came over to her, catching her wrists with a sudden catlike movement.

"It is your own fault," he said. "You will remember that blow to your dying day."

* * * * * *

They stood side by side at the window of one of the great reception rooms of the palace, the King and Brand. A driving storm of rain was beating against the glass, and the thunder rattled amongst the distant hills from peak to peak. Ughtred was looking more pale and

harassed than when he had ridden, sword in hand, in front of his tiny army and watched the Turks closing in around them.

"What is the meaning of it, Brand?" he asked, sadly. "There is something astir which I cannot understand. See how the people throng the Square in front of the Reist house, and scarcely even glance this way. What are they waiting for?"

Brand shook his head.

"The true meaning of it I do not know," he answered, "but there is treason abroad. I am sure of that, and I am sure that Nicholas of Reist is concerned in it."

The King bit his lip. If Nicholas of Reist were a traitor, what hope was there for Theos?

"I do not know these people," he said. "My men are all in the field, or under arms at the barracks. These are not native Thetians."

"They look to me," Brand said, dryly, "like a horde of Russian Jews from across the frontier."

"I am going to ride once more through the city," the King said. "Come with me, Brand."

They left the palace by a side door, and passed cautiously along the street, the King with his military cloak wrapped closely about him. All around was a constant muttering. The people talked together excitedly enough, but without elation. There were no signs that this was a day of victory. The King's face grew stern.

"I do not know this rabble," he said. "They are not my own people."

"They are the tools of Domiloff," Brand answered.

"It is he who is at the root of all this trouble. It is he who has corrupted Nicholas of Reist."

They rode across the Square, and the people scattered before them with muttered imprecations. Brand suddenly turned into a side street and motioned the King to follow him.

"Our police," he said, "have failed to catch Domiloff. Let us try ourselves. I believe I know where he may be found."

The King's face lightened, and he touched his horse with the spur. But Brand hesitated.

"The place is in a bad quarter," he said. "There will be risk."

But Ughtred laughed.

"With a guard," he said, "we should have no chance. You and I alone will take Domiloff."

CHAPTER XLVIII

THE storm had driven away the crowd of loiterers from in front of the Café Metropolitan. The King and Brand stood under one of the small lime trees which bordered the road, watching the place. The lower room, unshuttered, and lit with several flaring gas jets, was filled with a crowd of men drinking and singing songs. From the upper windows came no sign of life.

"That is where I believe that Domiloff is hiding," Brand declared. "Do you see what a rabble that is inside the *café?*"

The King nodded.

"Russian Jews, every one of them," he said. "Anyhow, there are too many of them for us to enter the place single-handed.

"Brand, take one of the horses, and ride to the barracks. Bring down a guard of twenty-five men. I will wait here."

Brand nodded, and hurried away to the corner of the street, where they had left the horses. The King lit a cigar, shielding the light as much as possible with his hand, and leaned against the trunk of the tree.

Five minutes passed, ten, a quarter of an hour. The King, whose thoughts were none of the pleasantest, grew impatient. Suddenly, the cigar dropped from his fingers. He sprang forward with beating heart, bewildered, incredulous. For he had seen a strange thing.

Up at that dark, unlit window had flashed for a moment the pale, terror-stricken face of a woman, drawn back almost at once by an unseen hand. The echoes of her passionate cry for help rang still in his ears. And, strangest thing of all, the face was the face of Marie of Reist.

Ughtred forgot then that he was a King, and that his life was a pledge to his country. He remembered only that he was a man of more than ordinary strength, and that from that dreary little room a woman was calling to him for help. In the passage the few loiterers who disputed his way were brushed on one side like flies. He sprang up the little staircase, which creaked under his weight, in half-a-dozen bounds. The girl's cries were plainly to be heard now. He thundered upon the door.

There came for a moment no answer. The girl's cry was stifled, as though by a rough hand.

"Let me in," Ughtred cried. "At once."

There came no answer save a man's muttered curse and the sound of footsteps. Ughtred was wearing his military riding boots, and the door was crazy and old. A single charge, and it went crashing into the room. Ughtred stumbled, and saved his life, for a bullet whistled just over his head as Domiloff sprang to the window.

Marie, breathless and dishevelled, recognized Ughtred with a cry of wonder.

"The King!" she exclaimed, and Domiloff, who might have escaped, looked round and hesitated. Ughtred, who was as quick as lightning upon his feet,

snatched him back from the window-sill and threw him heavily upon the floor.

There was no time for explanations. Through the débris of the door there sprang into the room half-a-dozen of the loiterers from the room below. They faced the King, standing like a giant in the centre of the floor with his long military sword flashing grey in the dim light.

"Be off," he cried. "This is not your affair. I do not wish to hurt any of you, but I will kill the first man who comes a yard further."

They hung back, but one remained looking about him with crafty, peering eyes, his long upper teeth gleaming like yellow fangs. His hand lurked about his tunic.

"Little master," he said, "tell us what has happened here? There is a man hurt. What have you done to him?"

Ughtred's sword was within an inch of the man's chest.

"The man is unhurt and my prisoner," Ughtred said.

"Your prisoner, little master. My eyes are bad, and the light is dim. Who are you to come here and make prisoners?"

"I am the King," Ughtred answered, rashly.

There were those who knew him. There was a murmur which was like a growl, and Ughtred hesitated no longer, but ran his sword through the man whose knife was already stealing from his tunic. He fell back with a shriek of horror, and the King himself in grievous

danger, wrenched his sword free. There were half-a-dozen knives raised, and one must have struck into his chest. But Marie, stooping down, had seized Domiloff's revolver, and, leaning over, shot the man through the heart. The King, who had recovered his balance, sprang amongst them, and they scattered like rabbits. Then came a great cry from down-stairs.

"The soldiers! Quick! Save yourself."

They fled without waiting for a parting stroke. Ughtred lowered his sword and let them pass. There were three dead and wounded in the room, and Domiloff lay on his back where the King had thrown him. The King turned to Marie.

"You are a brave woman," he said. "You have saved both our lives."

But she held out both her hands to him, and her eyes were streaming.

"Your Majesty has saved more than my life," she faltered, "and I have not deserved it. I have been your enemy."

He took her hands gently.

"We have fought together," he said. "Henceforth we should be comrades."

* * * * * *

Eleven men sat around a long table in one of the rooms of the Reist house. They talked only in whispers, and a general air of uneasiness was apparent. It was rumoured that the King was in the city, and these men felt themselves to be conspirators. Domiloff was strangely absent. The Countess of Reist in her own house had omitted to offer them a welcome.

Their suspense was temporarily ended, however. The door opened, and Baron Doxis entered, followed by a foreigner, whom most of them recognized. They rose to their feet. Baron Doxis presented the guest.

"My colleagues," he announced, "this is Monsieur Gourdolis, the accredited envoy of the Czar to us. He has certain proposals to submit upon which we will at once debate."

A Counsellor rose up.

"Has the Countess of Reist any message to us from her brother?"

"The Countess of Reist," Baron Doxis answered, "is unaccountably absent."

"And Domiloff?" another asked. "It is chiefly owing to his representations that we are assembled here to-day. Is he too absent?"

There was a moment's silence. Then Gourdolis spoke.

"Gentlemen," he said, "my friend Domiloff will be with us doubtless before this meeting is dissolved. In the meantime, I will, with your permission, lay before you the terms on which my august master the Czar is willing to stay the hand of Turkey, by force if necessary, and guarantee your independence."

Some heavy curtains at the end of the room were suddenly thrown aside. The King stood there, and by his side Marie of Reist.

"My arrival, it would appear, is opportune," the King said, grimly. "Address yourself to me, and proceed, Monsieur Gourdolis."

CHAPTER XLIX

One by one the members of the Council staggered to their feet. The coming of the King was like a bomb-shell thrown amongst them. They were met in secret conclave, a proceeding to the last degree unconstitutional. They were receiving, too, an emissary from a foreign country which amounted to high treason. Doxis was perhaps the first to recover himself.

"Your Majesty's coming is unexpected," he said. "I trust that there is no ill news from the seat of war."

"There is no news, save good news," the King answered, having handed a chair to Marie. "Yesterday's battle you all know about. I will tell you the prospects later. Meanwhile, I see that you have a stranger here. What has Monsieur Gourdolis to say to us?"

Gourdolis rose slowly to his feet. He was a man of resource, a shrewd and ready diplomatist. Already he was scheming how to turn to his own advantage the King's unexpected presence. He played a bold card.

"Your Majesty," he said, respectfully, "it was painful to me to put forward my master's propositions to the Council of the House of Laws in your absence, it is still more painful to do so in your presence. I speak, however, to the representatives of a nation whose liberty and whose very existence is threatened, and I offer them—in a word—salvation. That is my excuse for my presence here to-day."

"What your offer really amounts to is no doubt the Russian yoke instead of the Turkish," Ughtred remarked, bitterly. "My forefathers have tasted more than once of Muscovite generosity."

Gourdolis shook his head gravely.

"Your Majesty," he said, "you wrong my country, and my master. Our demands are very simple, and I lay the terms of them here upon the table. The only conditions upon which I regret to say that my master is immovable is the immediate abdication of your Majesty."

The King sat with unchanged face.

"In favour of whom?" he asked.

"Nicholas, Duke of Reist!"

"Is the Duke of Reist cognizant of this, and willing to accept the throne?" the King asked.

"He is, your Majesty," Baron Doxis answered.

Marie rose to her feet.

"It is false," she declared. "My brother is a patriot, and he has taken the oath of allegiance to the King. I pledge my word for his that he will keep that oath."

A murmur of blank amazement was followed by a dead silence. Gourdolis was speechless. The King looked around him, sternly.

"Have I by chance stumbled upon a conspiracy?" he asked. "What do you say, Taverner, and you, Valgrosse? Did you come here prepared to listen to such a proposition as this?"

"Indeed, your Majesty," Taverner answered, hastily, "I did not."

"Nor I!" Valgrosse echoed.

"What about you, Doxis?" the King asked.

The old Baron, who, for many years had been chairman of the House of Laws, rose slowly to his feet.

"Your Majesty," he said, "I will admit that I alone of those present here had some knowledge of this proposal. I hope that your Majesty will not look upon my presence here as disloyal or unseemly. Only in my heart is deep engraven the love of my country and her people, and the one dread of my life has been the coming of the Turk. Your Majesty, no one has been a more sincere admirer than myself of the wise and careful manner in which you have ruled this country. Young though you are, you have more than fulfilled our most sanguine expectations. Only I fear that unaided we may as well hope to stem the tide of the mighty Danube as repel this Turkish invasion."

"You have spoken like a true man, Doxis," the King said. "Yet I must remind you that your presence here is akin to treason. What of the oath of loyalty which you swore to me only a few months ago?"

"Your Majesty," Doxis answered, "I have not broken that oath. I am here only to listen to what these proposals may be. That, I take it, is the position also of my colleagues."

A murmur of assent. Gourdolis remained standing, his papers in his hands.

"Your Majesty will forgive me if I assert that there is no treason involved in the presence of any one here. I summoned those to meet me whom I knew to be real and true patriots—who would not hesitate at a small thing to secure their country's freedom."

The King faced him scornfully.

"We have heard, Monsieur Gourdolis," he said, "of the freedom of those countries whom your beneficent master has taken under his wing. Councillors, I think more highly of your intelligence than to imagine that you are to be suborned by such clumsy intriguing as this. Freedom is one thing, the yoke of Russia another. I will tell you some of the considerations which Monsieur Gourdolis has presently to propose to you. The custom-houses are to be controlled by Russia. The appointment of all government officials is to be sanctioned by her. Our foreign policy is to be her foreign policy. The army is to be officered by Russians, and Russian is to be taught in the schools. These things are amongst your conditions. Is it not so, Monsieur Gourdolis?"

Gourdolis hesitated, and his chance was gone.

"You have employed spies," he muttered.

"Not I!" the King answered. "Yet I know your terms as they were proposed to Nicholas of Reist, and it amazes me only that you should have expected men in whose hands remain the destinies of their country to give you even a patient hearing. My Councillors, give this man the answer his insolent mission deserves, and let him be shown across the frontier. We will before long show Europe how we deal with our enemies. The Turks are not yet at the gates of the city."

There was a murmur of respectful enthusiasm. Gourdolis smiled a very evil smile.

"Not yet," he murmured, "but the end is not far off."

Baron Doxis rose up.

"Your Majesty," he announced, "our answer is unanimous. We have been misled by Baron Domiloff, both as to the nature of Monsieur Gourdolis's mission and the attitude of the Duke of Reist. We reject his terms. We decline once and for all to treat with him. We trust to God and to you to keep the enemy from our gates."

The King smiled upon them.

"I thank you all," he said, "for your confidence. Let me add that I believe the day will come when you will be heartily thankful that you gave this man the answer he deserved. The importance of our victory yesterday has, I find, been wilfully minimized in the city, but I can assure you that with only a very trifling loss we withstood an attack on the part of the whole Turkish forces. I have, however, better news than that for you. The greatest nation in the world would seem to have espoused our cause. Yesterday afternoon the English Ambassador at Constantinople presented an ultimatum to the Sultan, demanding the withdrawal of his forces from the frontier of Theos. The Press throughout Europe have announced the fact this morning."

Baron Doxis rose hurriedly to his feet.

"Your Majesty," he exclaimed, in broken tones, "permit me, on the part of your Councillors and myself, to express our unbounded confidence both in your military skill and in your diplomacy. Theos has found a second Rudolph."

The King smiled faintly.

"We are an instance," he said, "of an ancient nation who has benefited by the great new power of this generation. My diplomatic appeal to the English Government would have been of no avail but for the wonderful espousal of our cause by the whole British Press. That we owe to one who has been living amongst us, and who has three times within the last few days narrowly escaped assassination by the friends of Baron Domiloff. Monsieur Gourdolis, you have your answer."

Gourdolis remained imperturbable. He bowed to Baron Doxis, and moved towards the door. Then he faced the King.

"Your Majesty," he said, "has a singularly dramatic knack of turning up in unexpected places and at unexpected times. May that faculty not desert you during the next few days."

He closed the door and departed. The King rose to his feet.

"Baron Doxis," he said, "I leave the charge of the city in your hands. I return at once to the front. There is no telegraphic communication between the headquarters of the Turkish Commander-in-Chief and Constantinople, and in any case it is well to be prepared. Countess of Reist, will you favour me for one moment?"

She led him into her own little room, and placed her hands in his.

"We are friends?" he asked.

"If your Majesty can really pardon me," she answered, fervently, "—for always."

"And Brand?" the King asked.

Her cheeks burned with a sudden rush of colour.

"You may tell him," she said, "after to-morrow."

CHAPTER L

Into the black night across the level plain which stretched between Theos and the pass of Althea a woman rode as one rides a race with death. Her servants had been left far away behind—her horse's sides were streaked with foam, once or twice he had swerved and almost unseated her. She plied him with whip and spur, and passionate words. It was for the honour of a great race, for her own salvation that she rode. All was well as yet. The lights of the camp were twinkling like a band of ribbon across the hillside, and there was silence as deep as death everywhere, except when the wind came booming down the valley in fitful gusts, and bowed the tops of the lonely and stunted trees. Upwards she mounted, and the road grew rougher. Her horse's eyes were streaked with blood, his nostrils quivered. Still she urged him on. A little further now, and her goal was reached. So she rode on, white to the lips with fear—lest even now she should be too late.

At the outposts they stopped her, and the great bay horse, after staggering for a moment like a drunken man, fell over dead. She scarcely glanced at him. The officer, who knew her, rapidly transferred her saddle to his own pony.

"It is a message from the King to Nicholas," she said. "Tell me, how long will it take me?"

"The Duke is himself guarding the Beacon," the

soldier answered. "Madame the Countess will reach him in ten minutes."

She galloped off, never noticing that her pony's feet were shod with felt. She looked neither to the right nor the left, and she saw nothing of the strange restlessness which seemed to pervade the camp. Everywhere the shadows of men were moving noiselessly about. Spectral guns were surrounded by little groups of whispering soldiers. There was no bivouacing, the camp-fires burned low. Every now and then, when challenged, she mechanically repeated the countersign. All the while her lips were moving in one ceaseless, passionate prayer.

They took her pony at the summit, and a silent sentry pointed to where a single dark figure stood out against the empty background. A few yards to his left was the great beacon, and a row of torches burned in a stand, ever ready for the signal. She called to him softly, and even to herself her voice seemed to come from a long way off.

"Nicholas! Nicholas!"

He turned towards her, and she saw that his face was livid. He was horrified to see her.

"Marie! The good God! What has happened?"

"I have deceived you, Nicholas," she whispered, hoarsely. "The writing was not the writing of the King. It was Domiloff's plot, and I wanted to see you King. The King has saved my life. Forever, Nicholas, you and I must be his faithful subjects. I have given my word. I have pledged your honour."

Then into the face of Nicholas of Reist there came a transfiguring and almost holy joy. He uttered no word

of reproach. The glory of life was once more hot in his pulses. He drew her to him.

"Thank God!" he sobbed. "This way, Marie! Now listen!"

She stooped with him over that awful chaos. From below came a sound like the falling of autumn rains upon dead leaves. He held her to him.

"It is the Turks," he whispered.

She sprang away in horror, but he laughed softly.

"Marie," he said, "that is well. Instead of a sleeping camp our guns will rake the Pass, our men await only the signal. Up here, where one is near God, one sees clearly. I am the faithful servant of Theos, even though the King had been my enemy. See!"

He listened for a moment, and then crossing the hill, took a torch from the stand and plunged it into the heart of the great beacon. Tongues of fire leaped up to the sky, and a hoarse murmur passed like a wind through the camp. Then the ground beneath them shook with the roar of artillery. Nicholas took her by the arm.

"Ride for Theos at once," he directed. "You will be quite safe, for no Turk will pass alive through the Pass. Tell the King that I am his faithful servant."

* * * * * *

About halfway to Theos, Brand, galloping furiously out from the city, came face to face with Marie riding leisurely home on a small pony. He leaped from his horse in amazement.

"Marie," he exclaimed, "what is happening at the Pass? How came you here?"

She was very tired, but she smiled at him reassuringly.

"Nicholas has over ten thousand Turks in the defile," she said. "They must either surrender or be killed."

"Thank God!" he exclaimed.

She got off her pony and sat on a bank.

"I am very tired," she said, and, swaying suddenly towards him, fainted in his arms.

Brand was a man of resource, and in a few minutes she reopened her eyes. He poured some brandy between her lips, and she sat up.

"I am very sorry," she said. "I rode last night from Theos to Althea, and I have had no rest."

He made her drink some milk. They sat hand in hand, a wonderful dawn breaking in the east. By and by a horseman from Theos passed them at full gallop.

"The war is over," he cried. "The English fleet is at Constantinople! The Turks have sued for peace. Long live the King."

He vanished in a cloud of dust, riding furiously for the Pass. Brand took Marie into his arms and kissed her.

"Dear," he said, "I haven't much money, and I'm only an ordinary man."

She laughed softly.

"I think in Theos," she said, "we have clung a little too closely to the old ideals. Rank is very well, and money I know little about. But on the whole, I am glad that you are an ordinary man."

They rode into Theos as the King arrived from Solika. The Cathedral bells clanged out a welcome, the people lined the streets, everywhere breathless excite-

ment prevailed. Old Baron Doxis met the King on the palace steps. He held out both hands, but his eyes were wet with tears.

"Your Majesty," he said, "this is your day of triumph, and yours alone. May God send you in the future wiser and better councillors."

But Ughtred passed his arm through the old man's, and led him into the palace.

"I am young and I was unproven," he said. "I shall be quite satisfied if God will preserve for many years my present ones."

* * * * * *

Theos won for herself, as the fruits of that brief campaign, a wonderful military reputation, and every prospect of unbroken peace. She entered indeed upon that golden age which comes once in the world's history to every nation, great or small. Mr. Van Decht built a palace within the city, and invested all his vast capital in the country. Brand, whose services no one realized more thoroughly than the King, accepted a Government appointment and entered the House of Laws a naturalized Thetian. And when they asked the King what gift a grateful nation could offer him, he answered them promptly but in very few words.

"The right to depart from a constitutional principle. The right to share my throne with the woman I love."

There was no hesitation, no break in the thunderous applause which greeted his answer, and which Nicholas of Reist himself led. The marriage of Ughtred of Tyrnaus and Sara Van Decht under such conditions touched the imagination of Europe. Every capital was

anxious to *fête* them, the Society papers lived upon their doings for years. But even they did not know that during that famous visit to London, where they were received with a consideration rarely accorded even to royalty, they stole away one evening and dined together *tête-à-tête* at a famous London restaurant. They were unrecognized, and they enjoyed themselves like children. Afterwards they found out a certain seat in a certain corner of the palm lounge, and spent a very delightful hour there. When at last they rose to go he took her hand for a moment softly in his.

"Tell me," he whispered, "you find it possible to be happy, although you are a queen?"

"I am your wife, dear," she answered, with a little squeeze of his hand, which seemed to satisfy him.

An amazing whisper suddenly passed from group to group of the brilliantly-dressed men and women who sat about in the Court. The band broke off in the middle of a selection and played the National air of Theos. Every one rose respectfully. He passed her hand through his arm with a little grimace.

"They have found us out, dear," he whispered.

The people gazed with breathless but well-bred interest. They saw a tall, distinguished-looking man, with the mark of a recent scar slightly disfiguring his left temple, and upon his arm the most beautiful woman in the room, her eyes wonderfully soft and brilliant, a delicate flush upon her cheeks. The King and Queen of Theos passed out to their carriage.

THE END

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